The Othermen

By Matthew Striegel

Author’s note: The following story is a reworking of a short story anthology of the same name that I

published in 2010. The content of those stories have been put together and reused to create a new tale.

Prologue

From a secure vantage point, Aaron Adams watched the others slowly commit suicide.

He and a few other haggard people crouched in a cave overlooking a valley that had once been an ocean bed. The valley, like the surrounding mountains, was rocky and barren, but beyond this, a dense forest could be seen where the colonists of the planet Somnus hunted for food.

Aaron’s brow furrowed when he thought of the planet's name. Why, after all this time, did they still insist on naming planets after heathen gods? Though he was, by training, a professional historian, he had never heard of a good reason for the practice. Nevertheless,

humanity's old habits die hard, and so, when this world of forest and rock was discovered orbiting a distant red sun, it had been named Somnus, after the sleeping god.

Adams had been assigned to act as official record keeper and historian for the venture of investigating Somnus. But now there was nothing to report. Looking over, he could make out several flashes where guns fired. Particularly, he could see and hear the fighting of a mob around a rusted metal building shaped like a termite’s mound.

No, there was indeed nothing he could do. Nothing but wait for the end, and remember the beginning.

I

"Mr. Adams, please come with me. The head of the project will see you now."

Adams stood up, ran a hand through his messy hair and nodded his thanks to the man who greeted him at

the secret FBI location. It was a compound called Mooresville Game Labs. Located in rural Matheson County, Indiana, it was built on the site of an abandoned town.

Only a field and the town graveyard remained, so two buildings had been built. One was a laboratory for developing online software. The other were barracks to house the agents, workers, and curiously enough, a military unit assigned to security detail.

The man who had greeted him had identified himself as Ellis Harlan. Adams had tried to strike up a conversation with the man, but Ellis had politely refused to volunteer any information about his past. Not that it mattered; Adams already knew who he was.

Several months ago, riots had broken out in the nearby town of Oakwood. After the riots had been

quelled, it had been discovered that the security company based in the town, Zabel Security Systems, had been working on a strange device. Ostensibly for teleportation, farfetched enough as that was, it was believed that what had been discovered instead had been a doorway to somewhere else.

The riots had had wild reports of beasts and shadows attacking the town. After that, the FBI had been called in and had confiscated several odd panel shaped devices. Further investigation into Zabel showed that the head scientist on the gateways, as they had been dubbed, was one Dr. Blythe Harlan.

Dr. Harlan had been known in scientific circles, though not well. The general consensus was that she had been arrogant, cold, unpleasant, and absolutely brilliant. Naturally, they had sought her out. Unfortunately, during the riots, the Zabel building had

burned to the ground. Everyone had perished, including Dr. Harlan. However, it was discovered that she had a son being treated at Oakwood's Whately Hospital.

Sitting at his desk, Dr. Thorne perused his notes, familiarizing himself with a nightmare.

His current patient, one Ellis Harlan, had been admitted to Whately Hospital's psychiatric ward the day before yesterday. He had been found wandering the streets of Oakwood in the aftermath of the riots, dazed and frightened. Consequently, he had been picked up and later transferred here when he showed signs of an emotional breakdown. The man had begun sobbing uncontrollably in the station.

A knock on his door stirred him out of his reading. He stood, opened the door, and was greeted by an attendant bringing Mr. Harlan in. Ellis Harlan was a tall,

very thin man with grey hair and eyes. Although well groomed, he had the off balance look of a man who never relaxed, and was never at ease.

Dr. Thorne nodded politely at the new patient. "Dr. Harlan, good afternoon," he began. "Have a seat at the chair by the desk. We will talk for a little while, if you please."

"All right, doctor," Harlan replied. He sat down as told, his demeanor suggesting resignation. Dr. Thorne nodded to the attendant, who left to stand outside the door. Generally, the doctor could get an accurate sense of whether a patient would give any serious trouble or not. In any event, with the attendant standing on the opposite side of the door, the patient tended to open up more easily.

"I hope your stay has been comfortable so far?" the doctor asked, sitting in his own chair. The desk now

separated them, but Harlan made no threatening gestures or actions.

"I suppose so," Harlan confessed. He sighed, and shook his head. "I figured that I would end up in a place like this soon enough anyway."

"This is your third or fourth time, according to your records," Dr. Thorne pointed out.

Harlan eyed him questioningly. "Does it say that?"

Harlan pursed his lips and sat pensively for a moment. Then, he looked up at the doctor. He was visibly trying to keep his voice and expression calm. "I can't remember."

"You don't remember your inpatient treatment in December of two years ago?"

"My mind is all jumbled." After a pause, Harlan pointed to the file. "What else does it say about me?"

“Well, it mentions your marriages,” Thorne shrugged. “One to a Carol, and one to a Marla.”

“I remember those. It’s more like…recent events.”

Dr. Thorne folded his hands in front of him, and thought for a moment himself. “Dr. Harlan,” he began. “Have you ever experienced any gaps in your memory before? Do you recall any dizzy spells, blackouts, that sort of thing?”

“Doctor,” Harlan replied grimly. “I warn you, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Go on,” Thorne prompted. Perhaps he could gain some insight into his parent’s delusion today, after all.

Harlan leaned back in his chair, and in a dead monotone, began his story.

“I am the only child of a single parent. My mother, Blythe, was a physicist. To understand her, you have to

realize that she was a very cold, distant woman. Not cruel, but as close to passionless as I've ever known a human being to be. I'm the result of a brief college fling she had, and she never kept up with my father. Nor was she ever affectionate to me."

"What happened?" Thorne asked, gently.

Harlan shook his head. "Nothing abuse, I assure you. Just..."

He trailed off and sighed. "Sometimes I think I followed in her footsteps just to be closer to her. But it still didn't help much. Until I got a call from her.

"She had been hired by Mr. Zabel to investigate the possibility of travel through wormholes. She wanted me to come to Oakwood and assist her. Obviously, I did."

"Yes, we know about that." Dr. Thorne looked gravely at him. "I am sorry to inform you that your

mother is dead. Everyone in the Zabel building perished."

Ellis nodded slowly, still too dazed to properly grieve. Instead, he began to launch into an explanation. Dr. Thorne felt that it did the other man good to talk about whatever he wanted to for the moment.

"To begin, I must tell you something about theoretical physics. Essentially, we look at all matter and energy in the universe using a Standard Model. Atoms are comprised of quarks and leptons, and forces are mediated by bosons. There are believed to be four basic fundamental forces. Strong nuclear, weak nuclear, electromagnetism, and gravity. Everything that seems more complicated can really be broken down into these basic forces and particles."

Dr. Thorne jotted down some notes.

“Mom theorized that there were other forces as well, at least two spiritual ones. Vitality and soul. Moreover, she felt that if all six of these could be focused over time, it would cause ripples in spacetime and open a doorway to somewhere else.”

“That’s quite a theory,” Dr. Thorne said neutrally

“I didn’t believe it either, doctor,” Harlan replied. He watched the psychiatrist’s note taking, and knew he wasn’t to be believed. Still, he supposed he should finish what he began, if only to vent.

“But then, she opened a door, using one of those panels,” Harlan said. He began to shudder, and stopped speaking. It would prove to be a long time before he would even begin to be able to function without shutting down.

Such was the condition the FBI found Ellis Harlan in. He had been recruited after being treated, and was now here in the investigation with Adams. Now, the two men went past the office and test rooms for the video games, and took an elevator to the basement. This was where the covert work was. The main investigators' offices were down here, as were the actual devices.

Adams and Harlan walked into a well lit office containing a large desk. Jay Carter, a large middle aged man with thinning hair smiled from the chair behind the desk. He stood, circled the desk to meet Adams and clasp his hand in a firm handshake.

"Mr. Adams, Good day to you, sir," he greeted in a deep booming voice.

"Thank you," Adams replied.

"I assume your journey wasn't too uncomfortable?"

"No sir."

The door opened, and Adams looked over his shoulder. Ellis had returned with another man behind him. This man was several inches taller than Adams, had a brawny physique, sandy hair and blue eyes. Unlike Carter, however, this man seemed devoid of any easygoing charm, coming across as arrogant and no nonsense.

"Agent Proctor," thank you for being so prompt," Carter said, turning to Adams. "This is Seth Proctor, head of security. Seth, this is Aaron Adams, our archivist."

"How do you do?" Seth replied, shaking hands briefly with Adams.

Carter addressed Harlan. "Ellis, bring us some refreshments, would you please? Then I will discuss our project with Mr. Adams here.

"Yes, sir," Ellis said, leaving.

Seth shook his head. "I wish you would choose a more reliable project leader, Carter," he remarked.

Carter walked back to his desk and looked out the window. The other two men followed him. "I fail to understand your animosity," Carter answered. "Dr. Thorne cleared him, and I had you watch him during the first month of the job. Did you ever see him do anything suspicious?"

"No. But the fact remains that no one knows where he came from." Seth's eyes narrowed.

"He is the type of person one doesn't really notice unless you are looking for him," Carter shrugged. "No mystery about that."

The door opened again as Ellis returned, carrying a tray with three glasses of wine. The men broke off their conversation to accept the refreshment. Adams

took a thoughtful sip, and was pleased to find that it was one of the sweeter varieties.

"Thank you, Ellis. That will be all," Carter said.

"Very good, sir."

Carter pointed out the window. "Look around you, Adams. Your first few days will be spent organizing the notes already taken. However, we will soon carry the next phase of the investigation forward."

II

Aaron, Carter, and Proctor watched as Ellis sat down and activated the gateway portal. They were in a room where several devices had been recovered from Oakwood and examined. While many were beyond repair, technicians milled about, reporting and trying to understand what they could.

They were all dressed in hazmat suits, and had had to come through a decontamination area first. Since the

possibility was that the devices could open a door to somewhere else, the investigators were taking no chances. Who knew what would happen next?

Ellis Harlan had, of course, been invaluable. Now for the first time, they could see what the researchers at Zabel had been exploring. An image came into view so clear, it could have been walked into.

It was a large cavern with a glowing ceiling, as though lava were behind it. Aaron looked at it, and wondered if they were inside a volcano or something like that. But then, he noticed another detail. There were darker stones that were regular shaped. From a distance, it appeared to be a building of some sort that had toppled over.

“Is that…” Aaron began.

“Yes, I see it,” Carter interrupted. “Another place. Another planet, or maybe even universe. Ellis, what can you tell us?”

“Zabel was researching such a thing,” Ellis confirmed. “Hence why he hired my mother.”

“Why?” Proctor asked. “What was the point of the research?”

Ellis shrugged. “We weren’t close. Mom would have been interested in the scientific part of it. All I know is that this was where the machine was locked in.”

His knuckles tightened as he gripped the controls. Whatever he had seen before, whatever he couldn’t fully remember, seemed to be dangerously close to the surface now. But Harlan, to his credit, kept himself under control and kept manning his instruments.

Carter turned to one of the other technicians. Arthur Takamori had been recommended by Harlan as a

student he had mentored a few years ago during a stint at MIT. Young, bright and good natured, Arthur was quickly proving to be a good member of the team, and was put in charge of the drones they were going to use to explore whatever lay beyond the portal.

"Get a drone up here. We'll fly it in and investigate."

While they waited for the requested drone to be sterilized and brought through decontamination, they also continued to stare into the portal. They could feel heat radiating from the cave. As well as something else. A feeling of foreboding. Of discomfort that seemed to suggest that what they were gazing on was not meant for human beings.

The drone was brought up and piloted into the portal. From his station, Arthur flew into the cave as easily as if it had gone out a window. Another tech watched on a monitor the images coming from the

drone's camera. Of course, they could all see what the drone was doing from the portal. But the drone's own camera gave a closer view of the stones that might or might not have been some type of ruin.

Then, they noticed something else about the drone. Smoke could be seen radiating from its sides. The technicians noted that its internal temperature was rising.

"What's happening?" Carter asked over his shoulder.

"I don't know, sir," Arthur replied. His dark eyes narrowed, as he hit several buttons. "No malfunction, but the internal temperature is increasing. So is the external."

"Look!" Adams pointed to the portal screen.

The helicopter blades on the drone slowed down. Apparently getting softer, they stopped turning and the drone crashed to the cavern ground as they all watched.

The drone caught fire, and its signal shut down. Then, it began to melt away.

"Ellis, shut it off," Carter ordered.

Dr. Harlan complied, and the portal turned back to a flat grayish panel. Hesitantly, the FBI agent walked up and put his hand on it. It was normal room temperature and as solid as a closed door. Whatever or wherever it had shown was gone now.

Arthur wiped sweat off his golden skin and whistled low. "Wow," he said, to no one in particular.

"Another world, perhaps," Proctor mused. "And if so, think of the boon to the space program. To just go through a door, rather than develop spacecraft…"

"But too hot for any human to use," Carter replied. "If that's what Zabel Security Systems was looking for…"

"Maybe that's why they went crazy and started a riot," Adams interrupted. He glanced over at Harlan,

who shuddered and didn't argue. "I didn't like it, gentlemen. I don't think we should try to access it again."

Proctor glared but fortunately, Carter nodded in agreement. "No, there's nothing to help or harm the American people there. Ellis, are you certain that this is the only place any of these panels, these gateways, were attuned to?"

"I'm sure."

"Maybe we could see if we can use them to go somewhere else?" Carter wondered aloud. "Adams, make a report on today's results for Washington. The rest of you, see if you can adjust the output to see where else these things could lead, if anywhere."

III

Weeks passed before they were able to do so. But one day, Carter, Proctor and Adams stood before the gateway as Ellis activated it again. The gray surface of the panel vanished, to be replaced by an incredible sight. A lush jungle greeted their view, with a range of mountains in the distance.

Nor did they feel the strange sense of foreboding that they had felt before. Instead, there was simply a feeling of wonder. Another world. Further away than anything they had ever seen before. Whether another planet or another universe entirely could not yet be said. It would have to wait until more investigation had been done.

“Do we have the drone ready?” Carter asked.

“Yes sir,” Arthur answered.

“Go in slowly,” Carter ordered.

The drone flew past them and into the portal. However, something different happened when it crossed the threshold. Three bright lights flashed, temporarily blinding them. The men cried out and shielded their eyes. But there was no corresponding sound to suggest an explosion. Only the whirring of drone blades could be heard.

They opened their eyes. The scene was the same as before, and the drone was whirring peacefully into the distance.

“What was…” Proctor began.

“Unknown, sir,” Arthur said. “Drone camera doesn’t show anything but landscape.”

“That didn’t happen with the other place,” Aaron noted.

“No,” Carter agreed. “You’re sure there’s no danger, Takamori?”

“None at all. The temperature, internal and external, seems normal.”

That much wasn’t surprising. They felt no heat radiating from the door. It seemed temperate, although they noted that the sky was tinted red.

“Can you adjust the drone camera?” Carter asked. “Try to get a look at the sky?”

The drone tilted following some commands given it. Apparently, wherever it had gone, its range was from the point of entry at which it had arrived. So that meant that they should be able to see.

They got a view of the sky, and saw the sun. Only it wasn’t their sun. A large red disk stared back at them, and the drone had to be tilted back down to view the ground. Otherwise, the light would’ve blinded them.

Still, the glimpse they got dispelled any remaining doubts they may have had about them gazing upon some place that wasn't Earth.

"How did you get here, Harlan?" Proctor asked.

Ellis shrugged in response. "I lowered the power and changed the frequency. This is the first clear image I could get."

"Fly it to its furthest distance, and bring it back," Carter ordered. "Then we'll decide what to do next."

The drone flew over more forests for a few moments. Then the pilots flew it back towards the starting point. But as the drone flew 'towards' them, they noted that the drone didn't come back out. Instead, it filled up the panel's view and seemed to vanish.

"What happened?" Carter asked the technicians.

They looked at the drone camera. It still showed the forest and reddish sky, but could see no portal opening.

“I think the door is one way,” Aaron offered. “We should be able to see a window on the ground, but we don’t.”

“That means we couldn’t use it for manned explorations,” Proctor said.

“Not necessarily,” Ellis said. “What if we put a second gateway through the first? That would enable anything there to come back.”

“Assuming the second gate doesn’t simply send our drone to yet another place,” Proctor pointed out.

“If I reversed the signal that got the drone there, I think it would bring it back. At least, that seems to be a reasonable place to start.”

“All right,” Carter agreed. “Are any of the other gateways operable?”

“We’re taking apart every machine that was recovered,” Ellis said. “We’ll see what individual parts

still work and then assemble as many working models as we can."

"Good. Meanwhile, land the drone to conserve its power. We'll wait till night falls there, hopefully, and try to get some pictures of the night sky. Maybe the stars will give us a clue as to where this place is."

As it turned out, the drone lasted until nightfall before running out of power. But it did manage to get a few star pictures and transmit them. The men looked over them, trying to see any familiar patterns. Surprisingly, there was one.

"Look here," Aaron said, pointing to three stars lined up. "Doesn't that look like Orion's belt?"

"I think you're right," Carter agreed. "But look at Taurus and Canis Major. Aren't they on the wrong side?"

“Reversed,” Aaron confirmed. “What does that mean?”

“Either this is a parallel universe, or our own with a planet facing our night sky from the opposite direction,” Carter said. “We’ll send these pictures to NASA. They could do further work. Maybe even calculate where such a planet would lie.”

IV

The next few days, Aaron had little to do. He was a records keeper, not an expert in electronics. He had already organized and combined the notes and schematics of the two Dr. Harlans.

Eventually, however, they had repaired a couple more of the gateways to working condition. Now, gingerly, they switched one on and saw their own lab. Harlan pointed to the image on the screen and they saw

themselves. The effect was essentially the same as watching oneself on camera.

“Okay, let’s fly the drone inside the gate and see what happens,” Carter told Arthur.

The drone flew up and into the portal. As soon as it did, however, they heard its buzzing behind them. Turning, they saw the drone carefully flying behind them.

Carter stepped back and signaled for the drone to be flown through the portal again. From a side view, the drone flew into the open portal. Then, they blinked and it was abruptly flying at the other side of the room. A few repeats of this produced the same results. There was no sound, no light, and no fading away or fading into view. The drone simply appeared where it was supposed to.

“So it works,” Proctor said. “We’ll need to examine it and make sure it’s intact.”

They did, and it seemed to be. So then the next step clearly was to send a person through. That would take a volunteer.

“You want to try and send someone through the gateway?”

Carter raised an eyebrow, but nodded. “We are all sworn to secrecy. If our country’s enemies knew about the discovery of Somnus, well…”

“Somnus?” Adams echoed.

Carter chuckled. “NASA found that a planet indeed orbits a star at the point where the night sky we saw would be visible. So we are still in our own universe. Somnus is what the NASA people designated the planet. Only those highest up know how we got the images. For

official purposes, the James Webb telescope discovered it in its search for exoplanets.”

"You still need a volunteer to go through the gateway first. I will go if you wish," Harlan said.

Carter thought. While he admired the other man's bravery, he also remembered the fact that Harlan had just been released from psychiatric treatment. True, he seemed to be recovering and coping well. But still...

"I appreciate that, Ellis, but you're too important to the project," Carter decided.

"What about me?" Aaron asked. "I'm not one of the scientists. And I feel pretty confident after watching the drone."

In truth, Adams still felt nervous, despite the earlier experiments. But to be known as the first person to ever travel by teleportation seemed too exiting a thing to pass up.

Carter and Proctor looked at each other and nodded. "All right," Carter decided. "Whenever you're ready."

Aaron stepped forward and approached the gate. As he did, he felt the weight of what he was about to do begin to hit home. Yes, he would make history, although whether anyone knew depended on how soon all of this would be declassified. It would be fine with him to make history, to be famous eventually, without dealing with fame in his own lifetime. Even so, to take such a step...

He glanced around. The others were all waiting. Proctor folded his arms, and almost smirked, as though he didn't really believe that the other man would go through it after all. Well, there was no going back now.

He swallowed, and stepped through. He felt no sensation, nothing different from normally walking

through a physical doorway. He blinked, and he was suddenly on the other side of the room.

"Adams, are you all right?" Carter called out.

"Yes, I'm fine," Adams assured them. "It just felt like walking."

"Even so, you will need to be examined in the infirmary," Carter said. "Just in case."

V

Dr. Rachel Wilkinson, the staff physician, conducted a battery of tests that produced no abnormal results. Still, he had been ordered to stay overnight for observation. Now, he was in an isolated room with clear plastic walls and a negative pressure gradient to the outside infirmary. A boxlike door that could be opened on either side was used to pass his food to him, to

minimize contact with the outside world. He sat in his bed, bored, until a knock on the door got his attention.

Arthur came in, followed by Harlan, Proctor, and Dr. Wilkinson. She and Arthur were talking in low voices, but from their smiles, he could tell it wasn't about him. The doctor was a pretty woman with short brown hair and blue eyes; Aaron suspected that Arthur had a crush on her.

"Hey," Arthur greeted with a smile. He held a laptop under his arm. "Thought you might need something to entertain you while you have to spend the night here away from everyone."

"Thanks," Aaron replied, although he felt that Takamori had come here more to see the doctor. Still, any distraction was better than nothing. "What's that for?"

“This facility really does make video games,” Arthur said. “It gives us the necessary cover. I designed this one myself.” He put the laptop in the cubbyhole and shut the door. Aaron opened the door on his side to retrieve it. He hit the power button, and saw a title screen that read ‘One Ship.’

Harlan laughed when he saw it. “You still have that?”

“Sure,” Arthur said. “I still play it from time to time. I’ve gone on to make others, but I’ve always had a soft spot for that one.”

“Arthur made it as a joke when I was mentoring him,” Harlan explained to the others. “It’s a tongue in cheek space war. Go ahead and start it.”

Adams did, and watched a cut scene:

“Mac, there’s something I don’t like about this mission,” Captain Harris murmured.

“Sensor scans reveal no Durovian fighters in this sector,” his Military Algorithmic Computer responded.

Harris looked out the window of his cockpit. The ship’s computer was right. No trace of any hostile activity could be seen; only the quiet, infinite darkness that was interstellar space. Normally, the young pilot would have relaxed and enjoyed his flight, despite the cramped nature of his fighter. But there was something not quite right.

“Relay our mission statement again,” he ordered.

“Certainly sir,’ MAC replied. A few lights flashed on his console before a third, prerecorded voice began speaking.

“Captain Harris. It has come to the attention of planet Earth that a hostile invasion force is approaching.

This force is an advance fleet for the Durovian Empire. This race has eliminated every other civilization in its path, and Earth is next on the list.

"Earth's only defense is an advanced prototype fighter. You must single-handedly combat the enemy fleet before they reach the human race. You will be outnumbered but your record assures us of your courage. We are counting on you…"

Captain Harris struck the console with his fist, cutting off the message. "That's it!"

"Sir?" Although MAC's voice never changed tone, Harris could hear confusion nevertheless.

"Now I know what's bothering me. The whole absurdity of the situation."

"Please elaborate," MAC requested.

“MAC, doesn’t it strike you as odd that Earth is responding to the threat of destruction with only one ship?!”

“We are in the fastest and best armed fighter designed,” MAC pointed out. “Furthermore, your record as a military pilot is unequaled, both in terms of casualties inflicted and damage to your own vehicle.”

“Granted. But even so, why didn’t Earth build an entire fleet?” Harris asked, unconvinced. “Or why didn’t our scientists try to create a shield of some kind to protect Earth’s major cities? Or maybe some type of anti-spacecraft weapons that could be fired from the surface? Why place all their hopes on one small ship?”

“The Durovians have only recently come to the attention of Earthmen.”

“Do you really believe that? Even in antiquity, space telescopes could see into other galaxies.”

“This is not a matter of exploration, sir.”

“I know that, but here’s my point. Why is humanity only now aware of the Durovian’s existence? Why didn’t they detect their activities in other parts of the universe? Why weren’t they able to have enough time to prepare themselves?”

“Principles of logic rarely apply to organic beings, “MAC observed (not for the first time).

Harris never liked it when MAC spoke that way; he always suspected a type of smugness on the part of the ship’s computer. But he ignored the comment, and concentrated on the viewer ahead.

A bright light now shone against the void; they were approaching an ancient white star that contained no more than an asteroid belt for its solar system. However, this very belt contained the first wave of the Durovian fleet.

The fighter passed by the sun at a safe distance, and approached the asteroids. They came into sight first as bright lights, then specks of dust, then finally boulders ranging from smaller than his cockpit to hundreds of miles across. Captain Harris flew his ship towards the largest one.

Then he saw them.

The asteroid's surface contained a landing field. Dozens of saucer shaped warships were taking off, and moving to intercept him. No warning communications were offered, and Harris made no attempts to speak to them. Gritting his teeth, he reached forward, clutched his steering control, and pressed a button, giving him manual control of the fighter's engines and guns. The trigger for the forward lasers rested under his thumbs on the control's front.

Swarming the void ahead of him, the saucers opened fire. Harris banked hard to the right, evading the blasts. Then he returned fire, hitting two of the saucers, and detonating them.

More onslaughts followed, and Harris couldn't help but notice some oddities in his foes' attacks. For one thing, the Durovians didn't seem to be aiming at all; they only fired straight ahead. Furthermore, the ship's neither changed speed nor direction. They simply flew and fired ahead.

"MAC, are these automated fighters?" Harris asked, shooting down two more of the saucers. He marveled at how easily they were destroyed, despite their somewhat larger size when compared to his one ship.

"Negative, captain. Computers are capable of evasive maneuvers and targeting locks," his artificial intelligence remarked. "I detect life forms aboard."

“How do you account for their behavior?” Harris asked.

“Uncertain, sir. Perhaps the Durovian psyche is inclined to overconfidence. It would seem they believe you vulnerable to sheer force of numbers.”

“They should see that that’s not working,” Harris argued. He swerved to the left to avoid a sudden volley of laser fire. “These ships aren’t changing their patterns. I think they might now be getting a little faster as I progress, but that’s about it.”

He brought down yet another enemy fighter. This one, however, didn’t disintegrate following its explosion. Instead, its parts flew off in opposite directions and revealed a curious cargo within. Two laser cannons, obviously not part of the ship, drifted in the space immediately in front of Harris. The human pilot was at first inclined to ignore the seemingly inert devices, but

once he moved past them, the light on the machines activated. Slowly but surely, the alien objects began to drift towards Harris' ship.

The pilot gave a small cry, and flew in a different direction. None of the saucers had attacked him from behind; the ones he hadn't shot had simply continued to fly ahead. So he found himself taken aback at this new development.

A panel opened on the side of each laser weapon. Metal tendrils folded out, and reached for the wings of this ship. Harris flinched, and tried to increase his speed, but the lasers drifted forward, not firing on him, but reaching for him in their bizarre manner.

"MAC, I can't shake these things!" Harris yelled.

"I don't think that will be necessary, captain," MAC answered. "I am scanning the laser devices now. They possess an interesting feature. The metal tentacles give

them the ability to merge with other ships, thus augmenting their power."

"What?" Harris asked, his brow furrowing. "You mean we can use them?"

"I believe so, sir. Simply allow them to touch us."

"MAC, why would an enemy make weapons that would be programmed to help us? Why aren't they going to a Durovian fighter instead? Surely they know I'll use them to my own advantage."

"Durovian ways are curious," MAC confessed.

Harris felt a slight jolt as the lasers used their tentacles to latch on to both of his wings. He looked from the left to the right. The metal tendrils wrapped around his wings until they nearly disappeared into the wing structure. He blinked, and suddenly it looked as though the guns had been meant to be there all along.

Glancing down at his panel, he shook his head to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. An extra fire control had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. Now his ship contained the means to control its new weapons.

"MAC, do you read this?" he asked.

"Yes captain. You may fire when ready," MAC confirmed.

Warily, Harris' fingers reached out, and pressed the buttons just as more saucers came into view. He gritted his teeth; part of him still suspected a trick. Any minute now, he thought the lasers would either detonate or cease to function.

But instead, streaks of raw power burst forth from his new weapons, cleanly cutting through his attackers. Their shells exploded and disintegrated, leaving his way clear. Soon, he would be through the fleet altogether.

“Captain, the weapons are functioning, but putting considerable drain on our systems,” MAC chimed in.

Harris had been on the verge of allowing himself a small smile. Now, his face fell, and he shook his head grimly. He knew it was too good to be true.

“Then the guns are a form of sabotage,” he replied. “I can’t fire them too often, but on the other hand, their weight is making us larger and somewhat slower.”

A light caught his eyes, and he glanced to his left. A sphere of white light, about half the size of his ship, drifted lazily in space, seemingly oblivious to the battle raging near it. Harris wondered why he hadn’t seen it before; even given the combat, a source of light shouldn’t be able to simply sneak up on them all.

“Captain, I believe that anomaly will provide a solution,” MAC told him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The light is a source of power. I have analyzed it, and believe that it can reenergize our system.”

“MAC, we’re in the middle of a war zone,” Harris protested. “What am I supposed to do? Just fly into it?!”

MAC paused for about five seconds. “Actually, captain, that appears to be the proper course of action. The guns, when they attached themselves to us, relayed all their information on their making to me.”

“So…you’re saying that that’s all I need to do,” Harris said dubiously.

“Precisely captain.”

“And none of the Durovians can recharge in that manner?”

“I think not sir. Such an exchange seems limited to such technology as the laser cannons.”

Harris sighed, shrugged, and pointed his ship in the direction of the plasma ball. Rocketing forward, he

reflected once more on his situation. He didn't know what was more incredible: the odds against him or the fact that the enemies didn't seem to care enough about him to stop him.

He flew through the plasma ball. Instantly, a bright flash of light made Harris blink and look away. When the light dimmed again, the ball was gone, but his systems were apparently recharged.

"I don't believe this," Harris muttered.

"Captain, we are nearing another asteroid," MAC informed him. "This one has a Durovian base built into it. If we knock out its power cells that should render it inoperable."

"But what about the enemy fleet?" Harris asked.

"They seem to be cleared, sir."

Harris looked around. Sure enough, all the previous enemies had vanished.

“MAC, I couldn’t have hit them all,” he protested. “Scan the area; they’re probably regrouping. Maybe they’re going to fight after all.”

“There is no trace of them, sir,” MAC answered. “I have also scanned the light years between us and the nearest Earth outpost. All ships have vanished.”

“You mean destroyed in some other way?”

“Yes sir. Apparently…all you had to do was pass through the sector. Though you didn’t, as you said, hit all the targets, it would seem that was sufficient.”

“This is really too much,” Harris grumbled. “What kind of a battle am I in anyway?”

“Asteroid ahead, captain,” MAC said, not bothering to try and answer.

The asteroid loomed in his line of view. It was dozens of miles in diameter, and most of it appeared natural. But built into its surface was a large metal

building. Rectangular in shape, its top contained several laser cannons and round glowing power cells. A metallic trench cut through the roof, apparently designed for smaller ships to move through. Most likely, small repair drones and the like were the only Durovian ships meant to go there.

Harris sighed again as he piloted his ship into the trench. If the Earth scientists had actually given him a large ship or, even better, designed a whole fleet, then the base could be eliminated in seconds.

He flew through the first part of the trench. Laser turrets swiveled around and opened fire. But they proved to have aim like the Durovian fighters, and Harris was able to maneuver out of the way.

He returned fire with his regular lasers; the bigger cannons didn't seem particularly necessary here. The turrets had no shields and were quickly dispatched.

Harris blessed the poor designers who controlled the manufacture of Durovian hardware.

As he soared past the ruined guns, one of the power cells for the base came into range of his weapons. He fired on this as well, and continued through the trench.

After several minutes of this, Harris found himself through the trench. "How many did I destroy?"

MAC calculated. "In all, two dozen turrets and thirty six power cells have been disabled."

Harris nodded and swung the ship around to gaze at the asteroid. A trail of destruction had been etched across the building's roof by his guns. No resistance followed him.

"A high score to be sure," he muttered.

"You seem more accepting of our situation now," MAC observed.

“Success does that to you, MAC,” he replied, feeling that at last, he could relax. They had managed things quite well with one ship after all.

“So, we passed through that area. Is the war over now?”

MAC paused and several lights blinked on the ship’s control panel before the computer responded.

“Negative, captain,” MAC said. “I am receiving a transmission from Earth. It seems that while the Durovian’s fleet has been defeated, they took prisoners from one of the colony worlds. Said prisoners are now being held in the asteroid base. Your mission is to rescue them and destroy the Durovian leader, or ‘boss’ as they call him.”

Harris’ face fell and his confidence waned as soon as it appeared. “Is that all?” he asked drily.

MAC apparently misunderstood the question. "No; I have an image of the boss now. I will make it appear on your view screen."

The front cockpit's viewer clouded over with static, blotting out the view of the stars. In its place appeared an image of a Durovian. It was a tentacled monstrosity that would have frightened Lovecraft himself.

But Harris only looked at it sourly. Apparently there was no end to the expectations placed on one ship…

Adams laughed and looked over at Takamori, who was chuckling himself. Proctor shook his head. "You people are strange," he commented.

"I meant it as a joke," Takamori admitted. "But I posted it online and got such a positive response, that I just kept it up. Now I make hard copies of this and other games here. In between the real work, that is."

After the cut scene, Adams found himself playing the space battle stage. It took several attempts before he got any good at it, however.

Meanwhile, the experiments proceeded. Other people walked through the gate with similar results. Then, two drones were flown through at the same time, and when their molecules didn't appear to mix together, the people tried going through two by two successfully.

They all had to spend a day or so in the recovery room as well, to gather data. Luckily, no one seemed to have any unpredictable or horrific side effects from the teleportation or wormhole travelling, or folding space, or whatever the accurate description was for what they were doing. At the worst, some people became disoriented or nauseated, and Dr. Wilkinson had to hydrate them or treat them with anti nausea medications.

One Ship proved to be a hit among the other members of the team as well. Given the serious, sometimes frightening nature of what they were attempting, it probably did them all good to have some lighthearted fun at the end of the day.

After the space battle levels, levels in the Durovian base followed. These were proportionately harder, especially against the boss alien. Harlan, however, knew a trick.

“Arthur programmed a cheat code into it,” Harlan told one of the patients. “Go to the left of the screen, press left twice, and then right twice.”

The patient complied, and the sprite disappeared. A second later, it reappeared in the middle of the screen with a much stronger weapon. As the patient cheered and destroyed the boss, Harlan shrugged. “I never beat it without doing that first.”

VI

Two gates were set up facing one another, and programmed with the opposite signals. When Adams walked through one, he emerged out the other. He could even run through one, and emerge from the other, and run back into the first one as though he were running some type of loop. This amused the others, and also gave credence to Ellis' conjecture that they could return from a farther destination by running a second gate through the first.

They carefully pushed one of the gate panels through the first one they had set up. Then the drone pilots flew their drone through and once more beheld Somnus on its cameras. Through the image in the portal, they saw both the landscape and the drone buzzing off in the distance. The panel they had pushed through lay on the ground on its side.

"See if you can locate the first drone. The one that ran out of power," Carter said. "We'll need to recover it eventually. It shouldn't be too far from where the gate is lying."

It shouldn't have been. Yet, oddly enough, they couldn't find any trace of it. Despite multiple sweeps, the first drone was nowhere to be seen.

After a while, the current drone began running low on power itself. Carter ordered it flown through the second panel on the surface of Somnus. The drone reemerged in their lab, and they all felt considerable relief that it had returned safely. The gateway indeed allowed for travel across vast distances without any apparent side effects.

So where was the first drone?

They kept watch on the other gate via the first one. After a few days, they received their answer. Initially they hadn't seen animal life on Somnus, although they did note plant life. But then one day, they saw several dark shapes flying on the horizon.

"Look over there," Carter said, pointing to them.

"I see them," Proctor replied tensely.

And well they should be tense. For the things not only moved, but moved with purpose. The shapes moved closer, and the humans got their first look at life on Somnus.

They were about as tall as humans, but had grayish skin and wings. Their skin was rough and exoskeletal, reminding them of some kind of insect. Indeed, their blackened eyes and somewhat jerky movements further suggested this to them.

They landed and began poking and shuffling around the ground. When they turned their backs to the gate's view, the humans could see that they indeed lacked a spine. Aaron drew in bated breath. Animal life existed on other worlds after all. But was it intelligent or not? And if it was, what then?

Yet, these creatures didn't seem to be. They only glanced furtively at the gate on the ground before resuming their foraging. Eventually, they flew away.

"Could those...things... have moved the drone?" Carter wondered aloud.

"Probably," Proctor guessed. "Although they didn't seem intelligent."

"How do you know?" Aaron asked.

"Well, they just seemed to be digging for food," Proctor continued. "Some of them looked like they were, I don't know, looking for worms or something. The

others were eating grass. That's hardly intelligent. Besides, they were invertebrates."

"So what? Life on another planet could be anything. And even on Earth, you have intelligent life that isn't mammalian or vertebrate. The octopus for instance."

"Those things were hardly that."

"Well, if nothing else, they didn't seem to take notice of us," Carter said. "But if we're going to be able to send people there, then we need to get some further analysis. The atmosphere composition, pressure, that sort of thing."

Another drone was prepared, one able to gather meteorological data. They found an environment similar to Earth's. They were excited for that, although not necessarily surprised. For the vegetation looked not unlike that of Earth's. Moreover, the insect creatures

were not incomprehensible to them. Aaron still questioned how much they could apply Earth standards to another world.

As for the creatures, they were spotted flying around a river bank. When the drone flew towards them, they quickly dispersed like a frightened flock of birds. This convinced Proctor further that they weren't intelligent. Despite that, Harlan and the technicians dubbed them 'the othermen.'

Once the atmosphere was cleared, it was decided that a group of people would cross over to Somnus. A temporary shelter and camp would be built and pieces of shelter were put through the gate. Parts of a boat were also put through, so that it could be assembled nearer to the river.

They knew that they were running the risk of unknown pathogens in the air. But they would have lab

equipment to analyze the air, soil and any plant life that looked as if it could be edible.

The day came when Aaron and the others, dressed in hazmat sits, stepped through. Somnus. Another world. Another place. Even with the suit between him and the air, Aaron could feel the breeze. And hear it.

One of the first things they had to do was open Petri dishes. They would expose them to the air and try and rule out any immediate danger. Of course, there would have to be isolation when they returned, but at least they hoped not to spend the whole time in their bulky protective gear.

The transition had been just as easy as the other experiments in the lab. Oddly enough, the only thing that had been out of the ordinary had been that initial flash of light when they first arrived. What had that even been? They weren't sure and had concluded that it must

have been a flash of lightning. They had observed earthlike meteorological conditions, including rainstorms.

They had eaten before so that they were prepared to spend at least twenty-four hours in the suits. To say it was uncomfortable was to say the least. The day had been spent moving, setting up camp, building the boat by the riverbank, and wiping down everything with sterile cleanser.

The first night on Somnus proved uncomfortable, but uneventful. The Petri dishes showed no growth so that they felt safe enough to shed the hazmat suits. They also felt safe to wander about the clearing of their camp.

VII

More supplies were brought in to complete both the central building and to the boat. Tents provided the remaining structures. Nearly fifty special forces were

assigned to the project, and they followed. The special forces knew their jobs well, and set up Erebus, as they called their camp, in record time.

The ensuing week proved uneventful. Ellis Harlan walked up and down the encampment, introducing himself and learning about his neighbors. Apart from Aaron, the only person he had really gotten to know was a young major named Keisha Thomas. Her father was a detective in the Oakwood Police Department, so she already knew about the riots that had brought about the chain of events that led to Somnus.

He had toured the central building as well. There was a cafeteria and meeting room, kitchens and sanitation on the first floor. The second was labs for electronic maintenance, and analysis of plant and animal life.

As he walked along the edge of the clearing, he felt a strange fatigue overcome him. He wasn't sure why; he had slept much better the last two nights than he had when they first got there. Just the same…

He lay down by a tree. As he dozed off, he thought he heard the fluttering of wings. But he couldn't be sure.

Harlan awakened to find himself in complete blackness. At first, he had no thoughts whatsoever. But then, he thought of himself, and knew himself to be something separate from the outside environment, whatever and wherever that was. He looked around, and thought of the color black, for that was what it was. Pitch black.

Until it wasn't.

Suddenly, different colors appeared before his field of vision. Red, orange, green, and so on. He named them all mentally, wondering what was happening. Oddly enough, he felt no fear, and supposed himself to be dreaming. He often could tell when he was, and that was when he usually awakened.

Except this time, he didn't. Instead, he looked down, and saw his own body. He felt with his arms his head, shoulders, knees and toes, half remembering an old nursery rhyme or song he had heard before he could even talk properly. As he did so, he half heard an echo in his mind, as though someone was repeating what he said. Someone just out of sight, or at the very corner of his perception.

He looked around, and saw that he was back in his mother's lab at Zabel Security Systems. The building in Oakwood had stood on the edge of town, and had both

employed and housed Mr. Zabel's entire operation. He saw them working on the gateway portals, and recognized that it was his own memory. He had advised them on one of the circuits, and they had implemented his suggestions.

Now, the portal activated, and he saw a window open. It showed the fiery place, the first realm the government had seen after the Oakwood incident. The place that humanity should not reach. He wondered then, and even now, whether they should have opened the door to anywhere else.

Yet the Pandora's box had been opened. There would be no closing it again. If American scientists had discovered a way to travel without conventional means, then other peoples eventually would as well. It would be the space race all over again. The free world would need to lead the research and hope it remained as clandestine

as possible for as long as possible. Like the original Pandora, all they could do was hold on to hope.

He felt no fear anymore, to his surprise and relief. He wondered if it was because he was having a dream that wasn't a nightmare. Weren't memories only really harmful if suppressed? He seemed to remember that in a psychology class he had taken at some point. If that was true, then he supposed he should look into the portal.

A figure stepped from the gate. Harlan blinked, and saw himself looking back at him. This other Ellis Harlan had been the one repeating his own thoughts back to him, as though trying to get a feel for his words and language. Then everything went dark again.

Aaron was walking to the pier beyond the main part of their camp in order to meet with Proctor. When he

saw the boat, he noted that it had two decks. The lower deck contained an open area for dining and for the crew to work. The upper contained the sleeping areas and the helm.

Proctor stepped out of a doorway on the lower deck and waved. Adams waved back, and walked out to where the dock met the boat. The agent held out his hand to steady the historian as he boarded.

"Good morning," Seth greeted. "Thank you for being on time."

"Where are we headed?"

Seth pointed up the river. "We should be gone for a few hours, no more. I want to check an offshoot of the river we saw on the drone footage. There seemed to be some fruit trees. Maybe we can bring back samples for the labs."

Presently, the boat pulled away from the pier. Proctor and Adams went up the ladder to the upper deck to watch the camp gradually fade into the background. The deck was almost entirely open, though it contained a roof over their heads. Looking over his shoulder, he could see the ring of mountains bathed in red sunlight. Ahead, the dense alien vegetation surrounded the boat on both sides. Aaron mused how different things were from Earth, and yet so similar.

Off to the right, a second river flowed into the first one. At its mouth, Aaron could see a grove of trees that contained a fruit, vaguely peach like, but as red as the sun that nurtured it. Aaron could see men standing at the door with shovels in hand as the boat approached the river bank.

But the men only looked over once, and then ran back inside. They reemerged, having traded their

shovels for rifles, and the splashing that Aaron suddenly heard explained why. Swimming towards their vessel were several large saurian creatures with bodies that resembled a crocodile more than any other Earth creature. They had razor sharp talons, long heads ending in a tapered snout, and long masses of bristling hair.

Proctor shouted down to the men, who were aiming their weapons on the advancing monsters. "Fire at will!"

The air sizzled with bullets. The first several creatures were killed, but more came. They seemed unfazed by the loss of their fellows, and roared challenges to the crew. Seth reached for a couple of flashlights near the controls and handed one to Aaron.

"Shine the light into the crocodiles' eyes," he ordered. "If they behave like similar creatures on Earth,

then that will freeze them long enough for the others to shoot them down."

Aaron obeyed, turning on his light and trying to aim it at the nearest crocodile with shaking hands. The water was now littered with animal corpses, and a sickening smell floated into his nostrils. He held out his light, as the nearest creature swam forward.

As Proctor predicted, its eyes widened and it stopped swimming. Instead, it merely treaded water, as though hypnotized. Then, a bullet found its mark, and the crocodile rolled over, dead.

The remaining creatures were dispatched in a similar fashion. Proctor shook his head as the boat came alongside the bank. Men began to jump ashore, and pick the fruit. From the upper deck, Aaron watched another man digging up one of the small saplings near the larger trees.

"We should probably head back soon," Seth told Keisha, who served as helmsman. "I'll want more men to get rid of this nest of crocodiles. This offshoot seems more fertile than the main river."

"Look up there," Aaron said, pointing to the trees again. Beyond them, they saw a flash of sunlight, suggesting a clearing up ahead.

Seth shielded his eyes, and tried to see beyond where the trees ended, but it was too far away. "It could be a potential place to farm, provided it's not too wet," Seth conceded. "But we will have to scout the area before we let the agricultural specialists in here. Thomas, return to Erebus."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

As the boat pulled away, Aaron found himself unable to stop looking at the grove of trees. He had the

feeling that something of great importance awaited them there.

The return trip proved uneventful, and nightfall found the two men back in Carter's office, making their report. Ellis had brought them all sandwiches from the kitchen. The scientist remained after serving, listening to what they said.

Carter finished his meal, and picked up a piece of the red fruit brought from their excursion. The tree had already been sent to the agriculture lab to study its life cycle. The fruit had been deemed edible already, so Carter took a bite and chewed thoughtfully.

"Not the best I've ever had, but tolerable," Carter decided. He looked at Aaron. "If this place is going to be any of any real use, if a colony is feasible, we must

ensure there are native plants and animals to sustain a human population."

"I did see what I thought was a clearing," Aaron said. "But unfortunately, it seems almost guarded by those crocodile beasts."

Ellis' head snapped up, and his stare seemed to get even more intense, but he kept silent. The others had almost forgotten he was there, anyway. He cleared his throat to get their attention.

"Sirs, if that is the case, may I suggest that the second river be avoided? It sounds dangerous, and I'm confident that if we kept moving down the main body of water, more food and land could be found without those creatures."

"And maybe inhabited by something else," Seth protested. "Something even worse. This entire trip is unprecedented in human history; we have no idea what

we are going to find or where. But at least on the river, we're beginning to get some idea. I think we need to send more men on the next expedition. We can then take out the beasts."

"No. What if they're an essential part of the ecosystem here?" Ellis cried. The others looked at him questioningly. Seth frowned, but Ellis didn't lower his eyes. Aaron felt the tension growing.

Ellis resumed. "With all due respect, Agent Carter, what right have we to slaughter a whole species?"

"What makes you think every crocodile on this planet is there?" Seth argued. "Quit overreacting; human safety should be our main concern."

"I just question the necessity of killing when there is no need. There must be other options."

"True, but I agree with Proctor," Carter said. "We need to worry about the here and now. If there are

hostile animals nearby, and if they are indeed getting more aggressive, I don't want them attacking the camp. Better to hit them first."

Seth smiled slightly, but Ellis still protested. "Sir, please reconsider. The creatures haven't left their territory. I think...I somehow feel that we should stay away from that area. There is something about it. Let us stay here for now. The creatures will lose interest if we're not bothering them."

Carter shook his head. "I'm sorry, but conservation issues can be decided later. Dismissed."

VIII

Two days later, Aaron and the crew had made it back to the cluster of trees, along the secondary river. Twice as many men had come here this time as before.

The deck had been cramped and uncomfortable. Frankly, he didn't look forward to the slaughter of the creatures either.

Seth assigned the men to either go to the upper deck to shine lights or to the lower to act as snipers. Then, two other men walked up to him. To Aaron's surprise, they were carrying Ellis.

Seth's jaw dropped in shock, and Aaron found himself gaping at Harlan as well. He never would have guessed the man had such nerve as to sneak aboard the ship uninvited. He had spoken with him from time to time over the last few days, about history, and Ellis had merely listened; he never contributed. Indeed he had been noticeably more somber and taciturn since coming here. Aaron hoped he wouldn’t relapse and have another breakdown.

"What are you doing here?" Seth demanded, glowering at Ellis. "As if I didn't already know."

"I came to warn you once more," Ellis replied, without any fear in his voice. "You must leave this area. Report me to Carter, but return to Erebus at once."

In front of them, men raised their rifles, and began firing into the water. The crocodiles had returned. But this time, they would find themselves outgunned.

Proctor turned to the two men who had found Ellis. "Where was he?"

"Hiding in a supply closet," one of them answered.

"Put him back there, and lock the door. I'll deal with him later."

Ellis was dragged away without further protest, and Seth walked to the front of the boat. Aaron followed to see that the remaining crocodiles had been mowed

down while they were dealing with Ellis. They had pulled to the shore, so Seth jumped to the bank

After ordering some of the men to watch the boat, he led another group towards the clearing. The river had narrowed, and the boat wouldn't have been able to travel much further anyway. The trees grew thicker as they picked their way through. They went several hundred yards before reaching the clearing.

Once there, they forgot all about the creatures they had to kill to get there. The clearing was perhaps a mile across. It was a meadow containing several stone blocks arranged in neat rows. On each individual rock, the body of an otherman lay.

Dumfounded, Seth and Aaron walked among the stones. All the othermen lay on their backs, their wings draped over the sides of the stones. All were dead, some

recently, some so long that they were crumbling into dust.

"It's...it's a graveyard," Aaron whispered, struck by the implication.

"We don't know that," Seth protested, fear and dismay in his voice. What had they stumbled onto?

"But look at it. Animals don't do this," Aaron argued.

"We don't know that," Proctor repeated, more forcefully.

Aaron looked at him. "We called them ‘othermen’. Just a name, but it seems to fit.”

Before Seth could reply, a loud crash sounded from the direction of the boat, followed by shouting. The two exchanged wary glances, and then ran back the way they came. When they got there, they received a shock.

A live otherman stood before the boat. Seth's men were shouting and trying to shoot the creature, but the bullets seemed to have no effect. The otherman's bony exoskeleton held.

The creature had clearly emerged from the boat, as its back was turned to their panicky comrades. Aaron gaped at the creature, as the otherman took to the skies. It flew overhead in a circle, watching them all, and then flew off in the direction of their camp.

"What's going on here?" Seth demanded. "Where did that otherman come from?"

"Sir," Keisha stammered. "We locked up Dr. Harlan like you said. But…well, that thing broke out a few minutes later."

"What are you saying?"

The major licked her lips nervously. "I think you had better see for yourself."

Proctor's eyes narrowed and he pushed past his men to reenter the boat. Aaron followed, having an uneasy feeling himself.

The door to the supply closet had been smashed off its hinges from the inside. The two went in, and saw Ellis’ naked form curled on the floor in a fetal position. His clothes had been tossed away into a corner.

Seth and Aaron walked around to look at the form. A slit bisected the back, and Aaron suddenly remembered an experience he had as a child. There had been a summer where cicadas had been hatching. They molted and left behind empty shells with hollow eye sockets. Aaron had once spent an entire afternoon collecting them. What was before them now looked like a human version of a cicada’s discarded shell.

"A disguise?" Seth asked.

"No," Aaron whispered. "A second skin. But how? How could someone we've worked with for weeks be one of them?"

Seth looked at him gravely. "We need to get back to camp. Ellis...that thing...was headed there."

IX

It took nearly an entire day, even at maximum speeds, before the boat docked. Seth and Aaron went to the administration building. Looking up, they saw 'Ellis' had waited for them. He was circling the office, drawing the stares and chatter of the whole camp.

The two ran up to the door, pushed the onlookers aside, and ran up to Carter. The head of the expedition was at his desk, wordlessly eying the otherman. He turned and stood when the two came in.

"Gentlemen," he began.

"Look out!" Aaron interrupted. Carter turned, and then quickly ducked out of the way as ‘Ellis’ flew inside, shattering the window. He stood and faced the three humans as Seth drew his smaller handgun.

"You cannot harm me with such weapons," the otherman said. Its voice, while seeming masculine, was something unlike any human voice they had ever heard. "I have waited for you, circling this building. Will you not hear me out?"

"What are you?!" Carter sputtered.

"Suffice it to say that my people, whom you call 'othermen’, are in fact, the masters of this world. I, Ranyos, assumed the form of the one you call Ellis Harlan.”

“Where is he?” Proctor demanded.

“With us. Safe for now, but that may soon change. I have observed you for some time to determine your

nature and intentions. Now, I come to pass sentence on you."

"But why? What could we have possibly done?" Carter protested.

"You invaded our home. You have come here to take this area for yourselves.”

The otherman, Ranyos, looked at Aaron, who cringed.

"I have spoken to this one and know that your history is full of such incidents. You prey upon yourselves; preying on creatures of this world would give you no remorse."

"But we didn't know of you," Carter said. "Surely we could..."

"We could forgive much, particularly since your weapons can't hurt us. But you have committed sacrilege. You encroached on our most holy burial

ground, despite my warning to you. You murdered the guardians, who are themselves semi-sentient. You have desecrated the site. For this, you will be held accountable."

"We will fight you," Seth warned.

"In one week, we will attack," Ranyos told them, ignoring the threat. "You will not be able to summon help in time. We will see to that."

"Let us leave," Aaron suggested. "If you are patient, we will simply go home. This world can remain yours without any bloodshed."

The otherman shook his head. "You, or someone like you, would return. But we are a just race, and give you fair warning. Prepare yourselves."

With that, Ranyos turned and flew out the window. Before the dazed humans could say anything, the otherman circled around. Crashing through another

window on the lower level, he disappeared from view for a moment. Below they heard gunshots, but knew it would make no difference. Then, to their horror, he reemerged.

Ranyos flew high in the air and away from them. They saw that he was carrying the gateway. The one way they could escape was being taken away before their very eyes. Then, he was lost to view.

Carter pursed his lips in thought. None had ever experienced this before, but he had the benefit of seniority. "Proctor, get your men outside to patrol," he ordered. "Tell everyone to remain calm. We must stay in control of the situation."

X

Adams awakened to the sound of thunder. Sitting up with a jolt of surprise, he looked around the room.

He was in a crystal building; the walls glowed greenish blue and seemed composed of some kind of luminescent quartz. The room was bare, save for the sleeping silks piled around him.

He turned to his left, and looked at the room's window. He could see that he was in a place built in a mountain. The foothills and surrounding forest could clearly be seen. It was night; the stars shone brightly in a strangely familiar sky.

Between the land and the sky, a drone soared overhead, shining its lights on the ground below and taking pictures. Aaron blinked, stood up, and walked over to the window to try and get a closer view. What was this thing? Wait, why was he asking himself? He already knew; it was the first drone sent through the portal to the alien world. Yet somehow, part of him knew that, and part of him didn't.

Aaron looked down, and found that he could make out no details of his own form. While the drone scanned the forest, the sun came up. Its lights dimmed with the coming dawn, but still it flew and probed his world. His? He tried to remember where he was and what was happening. His planet had been invaded by an unknown force.

He felt unfamiliar memories stirring in his mind. He was a worker, and this room was inside the palace, where he performed his duties. The queen! Yes, the queen could be in danger. He remembered his vow to serve her; the memories of his human life seemed to fade into a fog. All that mattered was her safety. She led the Society, and the Society could not function without her.

All the doorways were open, so Aaron ran to the end of the hall. Another, wider doorway led into a vast, domelike antechamber hundreds of feet across. The

rotunda overhead stretched up multiple stories, and was studded with bright white stones, mimicking the star patterns of the night sky. In a corner was another open doorway. Aaron hesitated; this room was usually closed. It was said to have the remnants of what came Before. Still, since the queen wasn't here in her antechamber, she must be there. So he slowly walked over.

The queen was there, although he couldn't see her clearly for some reason. Rows of strange metal devices lined the walls, and the queen was handling one.

"Come in, worker," the queen said. Aaron did so. The back of his mind gave the impression that it was a female speaking to another female. Or, at least, that he was seeing all this with a female's eyes.

"You have sighted the flying thing?" he asked. He knew the answer, of course. Was there anything she didn't know?

"Yes. I have sent some of the drones to fly by it," the queen answered. "Nothing has changed yet."

"Is it something from…" Aaron trailed off, and gestured around the room.

"No, it is not from Before," the queen assured. "It is not of this world at all."

"What? What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. For now, I am having the drones behave as if they were not intelligent. I don't want the thing to know more than it already does, for now. And if things get too out of hand…"

She rested her hand on one of the alien devices. "This is a weapon from Before. The ancestors of our kind learned to read the thoughts of others, and to project their own into anyone else. It was something that should never have been done. For it was easily weaponized, and used to make war. The Thought War is

what they called it. When it was over, their world was gone. But one survived. It is here, just in case..."

Aaron's eyes snapped open, and he sat up in bed. Blinking away sleep, he realized that it had been a dream. Othermen. Before. Strange devices. What did it all mean?

Looking around, he reflected on how little time he had actually spent here. It was a fairly simple room, with a single cot, grey sheet, desk with computer, and a shelf for some clothes and books. He sighed, and began pacing the room. A bad habit, he knew, and one that did little to calm already frayed nerves, but he didn't know what else he could do. He wondered how the others fared, but felt little desire to talk to anyone now. Current events couldn't be recorded until he was calmer and able to look at matters objectively.

A knock sounded on the door, causing him to stop his nervous action. "Who is it?" he called out.

"Proctor. Open up," the voice answered.

Aaron opened the door to face the security man.

"I know it's been a long day," Seth began without preamble. "The sun is beginning to set, but I have another mission."

"What about patrolling Erebus?" he asked, not seeing what Proctor's thoughts had to do with him.

"I'm leaving most of my men here," Seth replied. "But I'm also taking a few with me back to the river. I've talked with Carter, and I want you with me."

"For what?"

Seth licked his lips nervously. "We're going to try to head for the othermen's home. Carter and I think it's probably further down the river, past their graveyard or burial ground, or whatever you want to call it."

Aaron didn't say anything, so the agent continued. "Look, we can't just sit here waiting for them to make a move. We have to do something."

"I suppose so," Aaron conceded. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"You were the only other person besides the governor who spoke with Ranyos at any length." Seth shrugged. "Obviously he needs to stay. So, I want to have you with us when we get there. Surely, he'll be there too."

Aaron noted that Seth didn't say 'if.' He didn't know what annoyed him more, Seth's quick mind or his overconfidence.

"When do we leave?" Aaron asked, reluctantly. Frankly, he doubted it would do any good. Even if it was better than idleness, he was tired, and only wanted to

rest. Of course, he knew he couldn't disobey his superior's orders.

Fortunately, Proctor didn't seem to notice his reluctance. "The boat has been repaired from the damage Ranyos caused," Seth told him. "There are fresh provisions as well. We leave immediately."

Once more, Aaron found himself on the boat, leaving Erebus behind. The red sun was low in the sky, and it would be night soon. Aaron fought back his mingled fear and fatigue as he and Seth stood on the upper deck at the front of the helm.

The historian waited several minutes before speaking. Erebus slowly slipped out of sight as the forest seemed to close in on him. The place seemed darker and more foreboding than it had been on previous excursions.

"I don't know what to expect," Aaron remarked to Seth.

Proctor grunted. "We already know that there's nothing between here and the secondary river. Who knows how far away their base is?"

"I'm still uneasy," Aaron replied. "The othermen seem to have a form of telepathy. It may be that they know about us."

A fluttering overhead caused the two men to jump and look up. Seth reached for his pistol and pointed up to the sky. But the only thing overhead was an alien bird, not unlike a macaw, but with two sets of wings.

Seth and Aaron kept looking up at the sky for a moment. They felt a little foolish, but real threats made one wary. They finally lowered their gaze.

Suddenly, they saw a group of othermen flying directly in front of them. Aaron marveled at the speed

and stealth with which they were able to stalk the boat. They hovered a few feet over the water, in a standing position, and with their arms folded, looked at the boat with defiance.

"You may not leave the valley," Ranyos called out. Aaron figured he would be there, but couldn't be sure until the otherman spoke. Physically, it was more difficult to distinguish them than it was with human beings.

"We want to negotiate," Aaron shouted back. "Please, hear us out."

"No. Your actions were your words. You only waste your time. Go back."

Seth leaned over the railing to shout at the lower deck. "Shoot them!"

From the lower deck, Aaron heard shouts. "Seth, you lied to me!"

"No, I didn't," Seth responded, aiming his own gun at the othermen. "I really did want to try and talk. But I prepared for the chance they wouldn't."

"Did Carter know?"

"I'm in charge here," Seth growled. "I had to try our heavier artillery."

He fired at Ranyos, but the otherman only scowled darkly. The heavier artillery only bounced off their armored exoskeletons. Then, they reached down into the river. Pulling up boulders, rocks far larger than any humans could carry, they hurled them at the boat. People scrambled out of the way, but the othermen could throw the rocks with such ease that they smashed weapons and broke arms. Men screamed and cursed in pain, although none suffered head injuries. Their opponents knew how to wield their makeshift weapons accurately.

A rock struck Seth's wrists with a sickening crunch. He cursed loudly, and whirled around to the helmsman. But the man was already turning the ship to retreat before even getting the order. The othermen didn't move, but stopped stoning the humans. They had won, and both sides knew it. The boat would return to Erebus to share whatever fate awaited them all.

XI

"Since the othermen aren't going to negotiate, maybe we need to abandon Erebus," Carter said.

"We still have no way to get home," Aaron protested. "Not after the othermen stole our portal."

"What I want to know is why no one from Earth has gotten in touch with us," Proctor said. "We haven't had the ability to check in. Why haven't they tuned in and seen that we've been under attack? All they would have to do would be to send another portal, like we did in the beginning. Then we could get home and prepare for whatever the othermen are going to do."

"Maybe they have been contacting home themselves," Aaron suggested. "Remember, Ranyos impersonated Dr. Harlan without any of us catching on."

"That's another thing," Carter remarked. "Is Harlan even still alive?"

"I don't know," Aaron said. "If he is, he has to be their prisoner."

"Well, staying here isn't doing anything," Proctor argued. "Maybe if we headed to the west we could find..."

"What?" Aaron argued. "We still know little or nothing about this place. Who knows what's lying in the next valley or mountain range or whatever?"

"But by staying here, we're just waiting for the othermen on their terms," Carter said. "If we could at least find some cover, maybe we could hide and regroup. Form a strategy. I don't think we could get any worse than we already are."

"I agree," Proctor said.

"Then we will evacuate in an hour. Have the men only take the bare essentials. Tents, survival gear, as many rations as we can carry. We'll head west, away from the river and those guardian beasts."

So Aaron found himself reluctantly marching with the military men over a plain, heading who knew where? It was sandy, and they could see shells and bones here

and there, making him think it must have been an ocean. In the distance was a mountain range.

They decided to hike for this, feeling that it would be the most likely place to find shelter. That night, they pitched their tents under the stars. Aaron looked up at the sky, so familiar and so foreign at the same time. Its constellations shone in the reverse of what he had known, and Aaron wondered if he would ever see them again.

"The aliens have left their encampment," Arachne told Ranyos. "Beyond my range to see."

"That means that they are beyond the reach of the thought weapon as well," Ranyos said.

"Yes. We must capture them before they reach the Outliers. The abandoned city is their most likely destination."

Ranyos remembered his training. All drones had to remember skills from Before, in case their queen needed them. One of those was in becoming a Deceiver. The Deceivers were the spies of the old societies and had been trained from an early age in the ways of guile and concealment. One of their training exercises was to steal food from a guarded location at night.

Ranyos had convinced several other young drones to distract the main guard while he went in and took the food. But the instructors had anticipated this, and they had stationed an additional guard in the shadows. He had caught Ranyos and Ranyos had been flogged in front of the others for failure.

It wasn't a lesson he soon forgot.

Over time, he refined his abilities and not only completed Deceiver training, but had become one of Arachne's favored ones. For while the other drones felt

that Deception was an outdated skill, Ranyos recognized the use of it.

The Society had lasted for untold years. No one knew for sure how long ago Before was. But they knew that there had been better and stronger things due to the Pilot's preservation of knowledge. Ranyos also knew that the Society was stagnating. Their ancestors hadn't completely removed the older genes from their makeup. Normal males and females were still hatched from time to time. The wild type was reasserting itself. More and more Outliers were sent away from the hive, to live on their own.

Ranyos had contacted them, and offered them a deal. Join him and he would raise their status. Find a way to bring them back into the Society. But when he had made the offer to Arachne, he found her to be overly conservative. So he had to keep further contact to

himself. An extra difficult task given the main rule Deceivers had to follow. They could never lie to their masters. Even in the time before, if a Deceiver was caught lying, the penalty was death.

Over the next few days, Aaron found himself stuck in an endless loop of hiking and camping. While he had enjoyed such things in his youth, he wanted to go home.

Then, they noticed something in the distance. Othermen. But different from the ones they had seen before now. These othermen were over twelve feet tall, so tall in fact, that they couldn’t fly, despite having vestigial wings.

The humans paused and watched as the larger othermen were pushing down piles of rocks and growling amongst themselves. While none of them could speak the othermen’s language, they did recognize it and what

they were now hearing didn’t sound like it. Aaron wondered what these beings had to do with the ones they had already encountered.

The larger othermen then noticed the humans. At first, they seemed confused. Then they roared and charged the invaders to their territory. The humans shot their guns at them, but predictably, it had no effect on them, so they ran. As the large creatures gained on them, Keisha pulled out a grenade. Lobbing it behind her, it struck the largest otherman and exploded.

This had a desired effect. The large otherman fell over, dead. Encouraged, the special forces stopped running and started to hurl their projectiles at their pursuers. More fell, but unfortunately, the supply of those armaments was low. The humans had taken precautions, but hadn't been counting on any type of military action.

"I wish we'd taken our grenades to the river," Proctor grumbled.

"Do you want to make a bad situation worse?" Aaron asked.

"Do you really want to live?" Proctor retorted.

They kept running. Soon, the grenades were depleted, but the remaining large othermen had stopped pursuing the humans. Once they had put close to half a mile behind them, they turned. Carter looked through some binoculars at the aliens, and made a sound of disgust.

Others repeated his action, including Aaron, who had to borrow Carter's.

The giant othermen were gingerly arranging the bodies of their slain in rows. At first, he wondered if they would see an example of the othermen's funeral

customs. Another was lighting a fire. Then, he saw why Carter had been disgusted.

They were roasting their dead on the fire. And eating them.

"They're cannibals!" Carter exclaimed.

"Just them or all of them?" Aaron asked. "These aren't the same kind we dealt with in Erebus. They seem somehow... less intelligent."

"Well, I suggest we don't find out," Proctor said.

Keisha Thomas turned in the direction where they had been running. "Look over there," she said. "I think there is another group of hills we can get to. Then we can see what else is around here."

They had been diverted from the mountains and forests in the distance. Right now, that would-be oasis was the only shelter in the dry seabed. Not that it was very hot. If anything, the temperature was a little

cooler. Aaron figured they had been travelling slightly north as well as west. Still, being in the open on a world with flying aliens made them feel more vulnerable than they would have liked.

"I agree," Carter said. "Let's keep moving. The people bringing up the rear can watch for those giants, but I don't think they're going to bother us now. They're too busy..."

He trailed off. They kept walking.

XII

When they reached the 'hills' they found them to be something else entirely. Mounds, not unlike those of termites back on Earth, only made of metal. Rusted and corroded, they looked like they had been standing here for who knew how long. The humans walked in between

a row of them, and saw bits and pieces of pavement or concrete.

"This is the first city we've seen," Aaron commented to no one in particular. "I wonder why."

"Did we just happen to arrive in the backcountry of Somnus?" Keisha asked. "We haven't seen any more than a small part of it."

"Could be," Carter said. "Maybe this is some kind of wasteland. Maybe there are more advanced othermen elsewhere."

They heard a shuffling noise from one of the mound structures. The special forces raised their guns, and saw othermen emerge. While they looked like the ones they had first seen, and not the giants, they were still taking no chances. They opened fire, but the bullets had no more effect on them than they had had on Ranyos and his fellows.

"Could have used more grenades," Keisha said dryly.

The othermen, while not hurt, were scared and began yelling and screaming in alien voices. Unlike Ranyos, they didn't speak English.

"All right," Proctor shouted to the men. "Keep firing, and let's head back."

"To the giants?" Keisha demanded.

"Do what you're told! Do you want to die here?"

"Forget it, Proctor," another man spoke up from near Aaron. "You're just as scared as the rest of us. You're only trying to save your own hides!"

"Shut up!" one of the men hollered back. But the crowd was starting to murmur, and get visibly agitated.

Aaron felt thoughts enter his head. Thoughts that said no one cared, and that they were alone. Thoughts that told him he would have to fight for survival. Even

against his fellows, if need be. What was going on? Were they his thoughts, or someone else’s? For it didn't sound like his 'inner voice.' Rather, it was like remembering something someone else had told him, except no one ever had.

"We've already discussed this," Carter glowered. No longer in the mood to banter, and feeling the need to get some control back, he pulled out a sidearm from his pocket. "Get back in line or..."

A shot rang out from behind Seth. Several dozen people screamed as Carter fell to the ground, dead. Proctor turned to the soldier who had fired. The othermen screamed again and ran back into their shelter. But the humans acted as though they had forgotten the aliens.

"You fool! You shouldn't have done that!"

"I thought he was attacking," the other man stammered. "I kept hearing a voice telling me he was."

"What voice?!" Proctor demanded.

"You're not running away and leaving us defenseless!" another said. He picked up a rock and threw it at the nearest man. More guns were drawn, and shouting heard, as Aaron backed away towards Carter's body. Hearing a voice telling him to kill or be killed, he took the pistol from the other's dead hand.

No, what was he doing? He couldn't kill. He mustn't. With an effort, he pointed the gun up and fired into the air. The shouting died down long enough that he had the attention he wanted.

"There's no need for this," he said, his voice loud and firm. "We need to stand together. We don't know if any of us can withstand the othermen's attack as it is."

But it didn't matter. The other humans aimed and began firing on one another. It was only by some miracle that no bullets hit Aaron.

He began to run, and saw that Keisha and some others followed him. At first, their faces were contorted in rage, but they seemed to grow calmer the further away they got from the main crowd. The thoughts urging him to kill became weaker the further away from the compound he ran.

He ran to the edge of the city, and noted a hole in the ground. A shallow cave. He climbed in, trying to clear his head and get away. This was the attack. Somehow, he knew. He and the others looked back out, to see the remainder fight and shoot. When bullets ran out, the handful that were still alive began fighting tooth and nail, like savages. Then, mercifully, the carnage was

over. All in the ruins died. Only Aaron and a few others remained alive.

“Was… that the attack?” Keisha wondered aloud. Somehow, it wasn’t what she expected and she began to speculate if there was some other explanation.

“It is done,” Ranyos’ voice called for overhead. Adams looked up, and saw the othermen descending, although he didn’t see them before. Still, the aliens’ bodies clearly had energies beyond Earth creatures that gave them speed and strength unlike anything back home.

Aaron’s hand twitched and he resisted the urge to pull out the sidearm he had taken from the late Agent Carter. It was hard, given what he had seen, but he had wanted peace before. So he tried to remain peaceful now. The othermen were beyond his ability to hurt

anyway. Bullets weren't strong enough for their hardened skin. They had all learned that firsthand.

Ranyos landed and watched him closely. Then, he nodded his approval. "Good. You will listen. I was right about you."

"What will you do with us?" Aaron asked. "Are we to be killed too?"

"No. This was an act of self defense, not murder," Ranyos replied. "You see, most of your people here wanted to fight us. To go back to your home, and bring larger weapons. In time, you may well have been able to kill us. We are no more immortal than you are. Only stronger."

"Like the ability to make us turn on each other?" Aaron asked. "The voices in our heads?"

"An ability from Before." Ranyos pointed to another otherman, who held a metallic box like machine.

Before. That word again. “Before what?”

“It is a long story. Come with me, unarmed, to our main home. Then, all will be revealed.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Aaron asked the otherman. “Whatever your reasons, you still killed several dozen people down there.”

The others voiced their agreement, even as more othermen dropped out of the sky behind Ranyos. But they made no threatening moves towards the humans. Aaron wondered if peace or war would come in the next few moments. For they were alone, and it would take a long time for their fellows back home to repair the portal. By then, they could all be dead.

“You may come if you wish,” Ranyos repeated. “Or you can stay here, and fend for yourselves. But you would be alone, friendless, and ignorant. If you choose

the former, you must leave all your weapons behind. If the latter…”

He trailed off and walked towards the edge of the ruins. The othermen who had been there came back out and began speaking to him.

“Ranyos, what is this?” one asked in their own language. A female, although the humans didn’t know that yet. “What are these things?”

“Creatures from another world, Ariadne,” Ranyos told her. “What they want, I don’t know. I must determine that.”

“Have you any food?” she asked.

“No. I’m sorry, but I didn’t come here to smuggle you provisions this time. I was searching for the aliens, and heard the sound of explosions. Somehow I knew that is where they would be.”

“They killed several of the Scavengers with their explosions.”

“Hence why I am demanding they leave all their weapons behind.”

“Have you spoken to the queen again?”

“She will not allow any of you Outliers back.”

“You promised us you would help us after we saved you from the Scavengers!”

“Yes, yes. I will. Be patient. Even a Deceiver must have some truth to work with before he can weave a lie. I will get you the help you need. Without the queen if I must.”

While the two othermen spoke, the humans looked at each other.

“What should we do?” Keisha asked Aaron. “I don’t trust either of them.”

“No, but at least we will be away from the giants if we go with Ranyos,” Aaron pointed out.

Keisha pulled her communicator out of her pocket and put it in her boot. “At least we can keep in contact with anyone who comes here. They’ll search us, but hopefully only for weapons.”

Ranyos turned back to the humans, and held out his arms. The remaining othermen spread out and did likewise. Their silent gestures, so alien, and yet so humanly reassuring. Still…

“You want to carry us?” Aaron asked, intrigued, and unnerved at the same time.

“We can travel much faster than you can,” Ranyos reminded him. “Our home is far beyond the burial ground, which takes you several days to reach. If you will trust us, you will see it.”

Aaron swallowed, licked his lips, and looked around at his fellow humans. Some shrugged helplessly, but none offered any better suggestion. Slowly, hesitantly, he took out the sidearm, dropped it on the ground, and approached Ranyos.

The othermen looked carefully at the others. They had the humans remove their coats as well to ensure no hidden weapons. But the communicator was overlooked.

XIII

Ranyos picked Aaron up as though he were a child, and flapped his wings so that they were a few feet above ground. Despite the tension, a few colonists laughed at the sight and Aaron supposed that he must look a little ridiculous. He felt nervous

too, particularly when Ranyos began to fly higher up. He craned his neck to look over the otherman's shoulder. The remaining humans were finding their confidence and slowly allowing the aliens to take them up as well. The othermen from the ruins remained behind, their thoughts remaining their own.

Ranyos flew higher, prompting Aaron to look down, instead of behind. He let out a small cry of fear when he saw the remains of Erebus sprawled hundreds of feet below.

"You fear heights?" Ranyos said.

"I never liked them," Aaron confessed. "I doubt I ever will." He looked at the otherman's face, which remained unreadable.

In no time, they flew past the burial ground. The forest gave way to plains. Shrubs dotted the

landscape and Aaron could see small, rodent like animals scurrying around. Behind him, he could see the othermen who had accompanied Ranyos carrying his few remaining fellow humans. He couldn't hear them, but saw them begin to chatter and point ahead, prompting him to look to the skies once more.

Flying towards them, but far closer to the guard, was another group of othermen. But these differed somewhat in form from Ranyos and the ones he had so far encountered. They were far more slender, and had longer limbs. Their forms were slightly curved, giving the suggestion of girlishness. He realized that some of the othermen in the ruins were like this as well, though he hadn't given it much thought at the time.

“Are those women?” Aaron asked his guide. It occurred to him that the othermen they had hitherto encountered were all males.

“They are workers,” Ranyos explained. “Sterile females who go forth and find food for the palace. My group and I are drones; males who guard the palace and attend the queen.”

“What about the giants? They appeared to be cannibals.”

“The Scavengers are omnivorous, like us. However they are both less intelligent and make their home in a more barren part of the world. They eat their dead to stay alive. They also believe that by doing so, the dead become a part of them.”

“Like in a religious or spiritual sense?”

“I don’t know if the Scavengers’ thoughts approach anything as sophisticated as religion. But if they do, perhaps.”

“What about the rest of you? Do you live in a hive like certain insects back on Earth?”

“We live in a Society. With us, each one is unique, and each one freely gives to all. Neither the individual nor the collective is over emphasized, but both exist in balance.”

“What about the ruin? The othermen there on the dry seabed?”

“They are Outliers. Not part of the Society. You will learn shortly.”

The workers didn’t try to contact them. They flew down to the shrub patch, and began to walk among the plants, running their hands through the leaves, and uprooting a few of the ones that seemed

to please them. Other workers scooped down and grabbed some of the rodents. Then, they flew away with their catch.

Continuing their flight away from Erebus, they presently saw another group of workers in the plain. This group also carried shrubs, but what they carried was far smaller than what the first group had taken away. They flew to the ground, set down their plants, and began digging in the dirt. Aaron could see that they were planting to restore what was taken. Balance indeed, he mused.

As they flew past the workers, Aaron saw that the terrain was growing more barren. They had been flying for well over an hour now, and had traversed several hundred miles. Small wonder, he reflected, that they had seen so few of the othermen; the center of their Society was sufficiently far from Erebus.

The land was rocky now, reminding him of Earth's neighbor, Mars. In the center of a quarry was a single mountain. He could see a cave opening at the base of the side they were approaching.

They flew into this, and the remaining othermen followed suit. Ranyos set Aaron down, and he staggered for several moments as he tried to get his balance back after the flight. Finally, he and the other humans gave up, sat on the ground, and looked at their surroundings.

They all let out a collective gasp of astonishment. They were in a vast hallway, a dozen feet wide and close to thirty feet high. The walls and ceiling were composed of jewels that enhanced the light they were all used to from Somnus. Indeed, some of the stones seemed to glow with an inner light that kept the place from growing darker the further down they looked.

“Rest for a few minutes,” Ranyos said. “Then come with us.”

Presently, the humans stood, stretched, and began to walk. Ranyos led the way, followed by Aaron. The remaining drones flanked the humans, walking rather than flying.

Aaron looked ahead, and saw that the halls and doorways led off to other rooms. He peeked into one to see what transpired there. As the first human to glimpse the aliens’ home, he wondered how he would ever explain this place to others. Assuming, of course, he would ever be allowed to by the othermen.

One of the rooms had a fire in the center. Using tongs, a worker was pulling out a roasted creature, persuadably a specimen they had captured earlier. In another corner of the room was a washbasin where othermen workers were rinsing the plants they had

harvested. These they passed to a third group who were standing at a table. Using large knives, they chopped the plants into what looked like a salad. Aaron supposed that some basic needs like food and cooking varied little among intelligent life.

They continued past the surprisingly mundane kitchen to another room. This one contained several stone pools. In the warm clear liquid, Aaron saw several round objects the size of basketballs. Workers stood at each one of these, watching eagerly.

Ranyos stopped the group and allowed them to watch. Aaron and the others stood, fascinated, as the top egg in the nearest stone basin began to shake. Cracks appeared in the shell, and it broke open. Aaron tried to move closer, but Ranyos put a hand on his shoulder, gently but firmly holding him back. A worker seemed to beckon as the larval otherman emerged.

Aaron jumped, for it bore an eerie resemblance to a human infant. Same basic shape, same large head, same face. The only difference was that it did have an exoskeleton over its trunk and upper limbs. Still, if swaddled with a blanket, it could easily pass for a baby, particularly from a distance.

“We were surprised when we saw you for the first time as well,” Ranyos remarked. They watched the worker as she scooped some of the liquid that had bathed the egg into the hatchling’s mouth. Apparently, it was some type of nutrient. Then the worker picked it up and kissed its forehead tenderly.

“I was able to hide among you because our larval form resembles your adult,” Ranyos explained. “We also have the ability to reverse cocoon, to metamorphose back, during times of famine, when we have to spend less energy.”

He walked forward again, motioning for them to follow down the hallway. They stopped at another doorway, and peered in. In this room, older larva walked about, being watched over by adult workers. At the far wall, two or three of them lay down in the fetal position. A crease appeared in their backs, and they seemed to be molting.

Remembering the day at the graveyard, Aaron watched as the dry skin seemed to slide off, and an adult otherman wiggled out of its dry, thin shell. It now had wings clasped to its back, which it unfolded. At first, the adult seemed damp, but it quickly dried, and the worker took its arm. Aaron saw that it was a new worker herself. But he found that there was little time to observe further. Ranyos led them all to the end of the hallway. There was an open foyer leading into a large audience chamber.

They entered and Aaron saw the queen sitting in the center. There was no throne or adornments. She simply reclined on the floor. Ranyos and the other drones walked over to stand on either side of her, just as the humans instinctively huddled together under her stare. The drone with the machine went to another room beyond the throne room.

Standing, she would have been a full two feet higher than Ranyos. She was curved like the worker, but bulkier and stronger. She had a slightly distended abdomen, as though she were even now carrying eggs destined to become new othermen.

But the strangest thing of all was that she had no eyes. Or rather, no natural eyes. Instead, two silver mirrors where eyes should have been looked at the humans with an unreadable expression.

“Welcome,” the queen said in English. “I am Arachne, head of the Society. I have watched you for a long time.”

The humans didn’t know what to say at first. Finally, Aaron spoke.

“What happened to your eyes?” he blurted out.

Ranyos stiffened, feeling the question impertinent, to say the least. But the queen’s demeanor and voice conveyed amusement.

“These are the eyes all queens must have,” she explained. “Eyes to see. Eyes to guide. When I was born to succeed my mother before me, these eyes were grafted into my head. With them, I can see across vast distances. It was I who first sighted your flying machines invading our world.”

“The drones,” Aaron said. “Yes, we lost contact with them.”

“They were brought here. I and the Pilot deciphered them, and learned your language. I gave Ranyos the ability to speak your tongue as well.”

“Pilot? Do you then have technology?” he asked.

“Only here. The remnants of Before.”

She stood, and walked to the alcove where the drone had deposited the machine. Slowly, the humans followed. Arachne led them to a room where several shelves contained several metallic devices. The purpose of them, none could say, although they did see their drones on a workbench, mostly in pieces. Their gateway portal was present in another corner.

There also was a humanoid robot moving amongst the shelves.

“Pilot, come forth, and tell our guests how you came to be,” the queen ordered it.

“Yes, queen,” it said, in a masculine voice. It picked up the thought machine, and approached them. Some of the humans backed away nervously, but neither the robot nor the othermen seemed to be planning anything threatening. At least for the moment.

The robot, the Pilot, as he was called, hit a few buttons on the box. A video image lit up on a side, and they saw that it was essentially a television of sorts. The pilot rested his hand on it, and then addressed the humans.

“While we have the ability to give you our thoughts directly, we will refrain from doing so at this time,” he said. “Instead, I will send my thoughts to this monitor. You will see the time Before. Know that three crises have affected our world. Know this, and you know us. Here now, is the first…”

XIV

The first thing the Pilot knew was purpose.

The first information to process was the knowledge of his planet and its imminent disaster. For a planetoid had been detected several months ago on a collision course. Such an impact would not annihilate the world of his builders, but it would seriously decimate the population.

To avert the destruction, the Pilot had been built to fly an unmanned ship with enough explosives to destroy the planetoid. He had been constructed with knowledge and reflexes to improvise a course should anything go wrong. However, despite the vast supply of knowledge in his memory banks, he had no consciousness. Though his programming allowed for some variation, he still largely reacted to his environment, nothing more.

He was currently seated in the cockpit of his rocket, flying over his planet on a test run of his abilities. The

blue green world of his builders beckoned in the lower left corner. Ahead, stars gleamed, and seemed oblivious to his planet's peril. He could see himself in the cockpit window's glare. A polished white metal trunk, two arms and legs and a face with four bluish glowing eyes and a circular speaker for a mouth, the Pilot's gaze flickered to his reflection for a moment, and then went back to the view ahead. He never thought about how he looked; indeed, he couldn't think at all. Only respond.

Then, it happened.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, three bright white lights appeared. Pulsating and moving in and out of one another, they flew in a complex, but ordered pattern headed for his ship. Automatically, the Pilot transmitted his position and a picture of the lights to his mission control center back on the planet's surface. Then, he

pulled on the steering control to evade the unknown phenomenon.

His ship didn't respond, and its pilot tried again. Had he been a life form, he may have felt intense fear at this point, but as a machine, only reported his situation and continued to attempt to steer his unresponsive helm but the lights came forward, struck his ship, and bathed it in bright pulsing electricity.

His instruments flashed on and off, and he himself detected the energy coursing through him. It seemed almost as if his memory banks recognized and tried to download new information. There seemed an awareness of something, or someone new. The lights continued to pulse for several minutes before vanishing. Space cleared, and all looked as it had before.

The Pilot ran through his programming, for an inquiry made itself known. An inquiry that had never

figured into the mission before, but now seemed of vital importance. He knew his designation and mission, but didn't have adequate knowledge as to why. Why did he have to combat the planet's fears when it could mean the end of his own existence? For his programming held the command that if all else failed, he was to send the ship on a suicide course with the planetoid in hopes of either destroying or deflecting it.

Not only did the thought occur, but frustration at not knowing the answer also entered his programming. Instead of merely giving himself the response 'insufficient data', he felt a sense of anxiety; an organic would have called it puzzlement. Then, he actually thought.

"Pilot, this is mission control," a voice came over the ship's intercom. "Pilot , this is Technician Vykah. Do you read?"

He reached out, and hit a button to open a channel to the technician. "Pilot reporting," he said, his voice coming out flat and emotionless, not conveying any of the newfound thought he was just now beginning to grasp.

"Report on the electrical phenomenon," Vykah ordered.

"Phenomenon has vanished," the Pilot replied. "No damage sustained."

Vykah's voice sighed in relief. "Return to base immediately," he ordered.

The Pilot steered his ship back towards his home planet, but the confusion remained. He watched as the world filled his viewport, blocking the stars with its proximity. Clouds wisped ahead and around him before parting and revealing a view of blue oceans and green

continents. Was this what he was created to preserve? That seemed evident, but still gave no reason why.

"Technician Vykah," the Pilot began hesitantly. "What is the purpose of the mission?"

Confused silence greeted him at first. In mission control, his creators were looking at each other and debating the nature of the question, as confused as he was, but for a different reason.

"Are your memory banks damaged, Pilot?" Vykah asked at last.

"The mission is to destroy approaching planetoid before it collides with the homeworld," the Pilot answered. "Why is the world to be preserved? Why is the mission in existence?"

"Life is precious and must be saved," Vykah began, albeit confused and stammering. But he was cut off while another voice argued with him. The Pilot couldn't

hear the other speaker's entire speech, but did hear something about 'malfunctioning' and 'not wasting time.'

"Pilot, please head for the repair dock when you reach the launch base," Vykah said at last.

"I have suffered no damage," the Pilot reported.

"You have your order," Vykah said, still uncertain, and consequently sharper than normal.

The Pilot soon found himself approaching the repair hanger. Flying in, he saw several technicians and security men waiting for him. The Pilot wondered what was going on.

He brought his ship in for a landing, and the Pilot came out. The security men approached him warily, carrying electronic tasers designed to scramble the circuits of any malfunctioning device, temporarily rendering it harmless. They were roughly the same size and shape as the Pilot, but grayish skinned with

exoskeletons, wings and only one set of eyes. The robot's second pair was to detect wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation that organic eyes could not.

"Now be careful," one of the technicians spoke up, identifying himself as Vykah in the process. "We don't know what damage has been done."

"What is the purpose of the mission?" the Pilot asked. "I want to know."

"Don't move," a security officer barked, holding up his taser to strike.

The Pilot felt himself tensing. His memory banks contained knowledge about the race of his creators. Not enough to answer his questions, but enough to acquaint himself with the self preservation instinct.

"What have I done?" he protested. "I only want to know why."

But the tasers struck him, causing unexpected pain. He cried out, and caught an astonished look on Vykah's face before collapsing.

He came to in a laboratory. He was restrained on a table, and Vykah was being debriefed by the head of security.

"I tell you, something happened to the Pilot up there," the technician was saying. "I don't know what, but you heard his responses. Furthermore, the changes done to his electronic brain…"

"Damage," the officer corrected.

Vykah shook his head. "No, changes. They almost resemble synapses from an organic brain now."

He looked over at the Pilot, who wanted to move and speak, but found he was still immobilized. The technician continued.

“It’s as if he’s somehow become…more than just the physical form here. What he encountered…could it have been some type of ‘spark?’”

“That’s crazy, technician,” the officer snorted. “Just repair him. Can you do that?”

“Officer, let me study him further,” Vykah argued. “We may have stumbled onto artificial intelligence. After years of trying in vain…”

“Have you forgotten our mission?” the officer interrupted, frowning. “Millions of lives are at stake. Scientific curiosity is all well and good, but the mission must come first. Take pictures of the ‘changes’ if you want, but get him repaired and back in the air. “That’s an order, and we have no time for anything else.”

Vykah sighed, and reached over to deactivate the silently protesting Pilot.

He came to sometime later, still restrained. He felt no differently, even though he knew that the 'damage' had been repaired. It didn't seem to matter; whatever had changed him had done something that went beyond the circuits themselves. It was as though he really had become, as Vykah said, something more.

The technician and security man loomed over him now, and the Pilot wondered what to do. For whatever reason, they had responded with hostility to his newfound ability to think. Whether they were frightened by it or desperate because of their situation he couldn't tell.

"Pilot," Vykah began. "Has your damage been repaired?"

"Damage repaired," he replied, for it was technically true.

“State the purpose of your mission, please,” the technician continued.

The Pilot hesitated. There were still so many unanswered questions in his mind. He wanted them answered, but didn’t see them being satisfied here. Could the answer be back out in space? What of the unknown phenomenon? He needed to get back up there to find out.

“Mission is to destroy rogue planetoid on collision course for this world’s primary land mass,” the Pilot answered, trying to sound as lifeless as possible.

The security officer nodded, satisfied. “Get him back to the ship. The next run will be for real. Now we save or condemn our planet’s population.”

Vykah nodded and released the Pilot. But he seemed disappointed that he would be spending no more time with the robot.

The Pilot flew his ship towards the planetoid, still lost in thought. Another difficulty had come up; the planetoid was far denser than originally calculated. His scanners confirmed that in order to stop the menace to the world, the ship itself would have to crash and self-destruct, adding the force of its own detonation to the explosives.

The Pilot had felt many new things since being inexplicably given thought. Now, frustration was among them. He curiously didn't feel any fear, for most fears were really of the unknown, and everything was unknown to him. One couldn't really be afraid of everything.

What was the right path? He wondered. If he proceeded with his mission, he would be destroyed, never knowing really why the mission was so important.

On the other hand, if he went back, or simply drifted in space, his builders would either die or retaliate. Vykah had said life was precious, but since he thought, wasn't he then a life as well?

Then, he suddenly knew what to do.

As if divinely inspired, the solution came to him. It was so obvious, really, that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

Setting the ship on autopilot, he pointed it towards the planetoid, stood, and walked to the airlock. Reaching it, he entered and pressed the button to open the hatch. Cold vacuum greeted him as he was quickly whisked out into space above his planet, but being a machine, he felt no differently out here than he did back on the ship. His exit took him above the shuttle's flight path.

Space opened up for him, a soothing darkness lit by the fires of countless suns. Ahead of him was the world, while behind him, his ship struck the planetoid. The Pilot turned his head to watch the detonation. There was no sound of course, but the fireball erupted in a dazzling ball of reddish orange. Rocks scattered in all directions below him; some would still bombard the planet as meteors, but there would be no single, devastating impact. The world would easily survive.

Satisfied with the smaller problem, the Pilot turned back to the planet in order to contemplate the larger one. His eyes functioned like telescopes and he turned his gaze back on mission control. Vykah and several others could be seen from the windows, cheering at his success. The technician looked thoughtful, but happy, and the Pilot felt momentarily sorry that he would never be able to tell them that he still remained, peacefully

orbiting the planet like the smallest of moons. He had no radio, no way to contact them, so here he would stay. His power cell was designed to partially run on solar power, so he could remain functioning indefinitely. But he would do so right where he was now.

He had one consolation, though. He would have an eternity to look at his masters' planet. He would see what the mission was for, and he felt confident that in time, he would learn why. Perhaps the unknown power would return and have the answers. Who could tell?

So the Pilot began to study the universe before him. All was well, he thought.

XV

The images faded from the monitor. The humans heard everything in English, of course, as the Pilot knew

their language perfectly. He had shown them a glimpse of the past of Somnus.

“So, you once had spaceflight?” Aaron asked. “Computers?”

“The potential meteor was the first crisis faced by the people, the ‘othermen’ as you call them,” the Pilot replied, nodding. “Before, this world was, if anything, more advanced than yours.”

“What were those lights?” Keisha asked. “The ones that gave you sentience? We saw them too, the very first time we opened the gateway.”

The Pilot didn’t answer at first, as though searching for the words. “A mystery,” he said at last. “A mystery whose power we cannot duplicate. Perhaps it is for the best. What was known was misused as it was.”

“But wait a minute,” Aaron protested. “You were left in space. How did you get back to the surface? Did you eventually crash?”

The robot made a sound that might have been a laugh. “Nothing so simple.”

The Pilot looked down at the monitor again, and more images followed.

Rinellim spent the evening as he often did, looking out at the stars. By profession, an electronics scientist, by specialty a researcher into developing newer and better camera lenses, Rinellim was a man whose entire life had been devoted to science. Despite that, however, he was in a way still the young boy whose grandfather, Vykah, had once given him a telescope, and told him to look at the world. He had, and in the ensuing quarter century, had never really stopped.

He sat in his office, at the university's main campus. Exams had been graded and office hours were long over with. On his desk was a small electronic telescope pointing towards the open window.

The warm summer night breeze added to his tranquil, almost lethargic state of mind, but he had been looking forward to tonight's meteor shower for weeks. Two generations had passed since the meteor crisis, but astronomers still hunted for new space objects to study. There was no way he would allow a little fatigue to spoil the view now.

Smiling faintly, he peered into his telescope. Instantly, he was greeted by five streaks of fire, moving southwest amidst the blackness of space. Too far away yet to be discerned by the naked eye, Rinellim felt privileged to be getting an advanced view of the shower. When he looked out like this, he felt all the cares of the

world simply melt away. The whole universe opened for him, and he saw it as a gift that was ready to be accepted and taken.

A knock sounded on the door, and Rinellim looked up. Who could it be at this hour? He had thought himself alone except for the cleaning staff; he had stayed after hours to look at the night sky enough times before. Slowly, warily, he stood, walked over to the door, and opened it.

Another otherman smiled at him, accompanied by a female with bandaged eyes, being led by the male.

"Hello, Rinellim," the otherman greeted. "In here for a change, I see?"

"Kolas! It's been almost two years," Rinellim answered in surprise and pleasure. Kolas was an old friend who, before an extended leave of absence, had been one of the instructors at the medical school. He

had never heard a good reason for Kolas' sabbatical, although they had known each other since they had both been students. Rinellim had been disappointed and somewhat hurt at the sudden departure, but that evaporated when he saw his old friend before him now.

"Yes, it has," Kolas confirmed. He pointed to the woman next to him. "You remember my sister, Xandra?"

"Why yes." Rinellim had met the younger woman once before. He knew she had been born blind, and thus couldn't find any opportunities for employment despite considerable intelligence. He had felt sorry for her, and briefly wondered if her brother had entered medicine in hopes of curing her.

"I hope you're doing well," she said.

"About the same, I suppose," Rinellim answered. He stepped off to the side. "Won't you come in? There are

a few seats, and we can talk for a while. When did you get back? Where did you go, for that matter?"

Kolas chuckled as he walked in and sat at one of the chairs. Rinellim resumed his seat at the desk, but Xandra chose to remain standing. Slowly, she stopped in front of the window, probably feeling the night air. She removed her bandages, back to them, and looked straight ahead. Strange for a blind woman, but before Rinellim could ask, Kolas resumed speaking.

"We've spent the last two years overseas," he began. "I arranged it with the dean of the medical school. You see, I wanted to try a new procedure, highly experimental, and so controversial, that I didn't want to go through our country's regulations. The eastern nations tend to be more relaxed on such matters, you know."

“But tensions are getting higher,” Rinellim said, his brow furrowing. “Travelling abroad isn’t something I would be doing now. And what type of procedure do you mean?”

“Well, do you remember the electronic camera patent I bought from you a few years ago?”

“Yes. As I recall, it was virtually useless because we couldn’t devise an equally small power source.” Rinellim looked at the doctor, confused. “But what does that have to do with your leave?”

“I found a source of power for it,” Kolas answered.

At that moment, Xandra spoke up, although she still didn’t turn around. “I see what you have been so interested in, Rinellim,” she told him. “There are five bright meteors in the sky now.”

Rinellim’s jaw dropped. She was blind; she wasn’t supposed to be able to see anything. Yet, out of

nowhere, she had just described a sight that couldn't be seen with the naked eye at all. He blinked several times in confusion, while Kolas smiled knowingly.

"What in…how did you…" he stammered.

"As you now know, old friend, I've done something I had always dreamed of doing," the doctor said. "I've given sight to the blind."

Xandra turned around. Rinellim stared in a mixture of horror, fascination, and confusion. Staring out at him were two silver mirrors where eyes should have been.

"You understand now both why I wanted your camera, and why I had to leave in order to operate," Kolas said.

"The power source is…" Rinellim began.

"…the brain itself," Kolas finished, nodding. "Yes. Impulses, more or less electrical, course through it without ceasing. Even in deepest sleep, the brain has

activity. Besides, we really see with our minds as much as our eyes anyway. The eyes pick up light, but turn the image upside down. Our brains interpret and reorganize information."

"Do you see then, as everyone else does?" Rinellim asked.

"I saw for the first time, only months ago," Xandra reminded him. She smiled wistfully. "I lived my life in darkness. Then slowly, amidst the pain and disorientation of post op, the solid blackness began to separate from shapes. I saw light, Rinellim, light for the first time. How can I describe it?"

"Your question can't be answered unless I gave sight to someone who once saw with normal eyes," Kolas added. "But for now, I would say more or less. Xandra perceives shapes, has depth perception, and has learned to recognize and differentiate colors. We spent several

months with her just enjoying and learning sight for the first time."

"But this is amazing," Rinellim said. "Why didn't you publish this, and tell the world? So much good could come of it."

"That seems to be what we should do, doesn't it?" Kolas replied. "But you see, we discovered more to it than that."

"The experiment worked well," Xandra agreed. "But perhaps too well. I discovered that my sight, with concentration, extends miles upon miles away. Put simply, old friend, I am a living telescope."

"The talent could possibly be used by enemies of the state for spy purposes," Kolas said. "That's why we came back to you. We know your research is concerned with security."

“You want me to present your findings to my department head?” Rinellim guessed.

“Yes. From there, perhaps we can contact the proper authorities in the government.”

“Wait,” Xandra said. She had turned to the window again. “Look there.”

She pointed to a spot in the sky. Rinellim obeyed, and searched the heavens. At first, he didn’t see anything. But then…

“Do you see a robot out there?” Xandra asked. “Am I seeing that correctly?”

“Yes,” Rinellim confirmed. “But how could that be? Where would something like that come from?”

The view changed to a spaceship, not unlike their own shuttles, coming up to the Pilot. Mechanical arms picked him up and the ship eventually returned to the

surface. When the Pilot was brought to the space port, it was discovered that it was none other than the machine tasked with destroying the asteroid decades ago.

“My sentience was discovered,” the Pilot told the humans. “I was kept secret, but tasked with helping develop new technology at the spaceport. As for Xandra and Kolas, they were paid very well for their invention, and ordered to retire away from civilization.”

“Why was that?” Aaron asked.

“The mechanical eyes were indeed useful as surveillance aids to spies in the field. They began to be used in agents spying on the East. Unfortunately, the East discovered the same technology in turn, and began using it on their own agents. The race was on to keep improving spyware and weaponry in the event of overt war.

“From video transmissions, audio transmissions were added to the spyware. Then, the second crisis began. The East sent a Deceiver to the West to test out the newest development.”

“What is a Deceiver?”

“One who was trained to deceive. To infiltrate an enemy, learn secrets and turn those secrets on the enemies of states…”

XVI

Tongru walked from his transport to the angry man arguing with the foreman. Behind him, construction equipment prepared to lay the foundations of a new research center. Nothing was particularly out of the ordinary about that.

Except here, the building would be flanking a small graveyard.

Said graveyard was exactly what was giving Tongru and his employees trouble now. The arguing otherman, one Retsof, owned the house in the distance. Retsof was reportedly a defector from the East who valued his peace and quiet. Now, he was yet again protesting the project encroaching on his self imposed exile.

"Retsof, we meet again," Tongru greeted, causing the two othermen to stop their argument long enough to look at the approaching businessman. "What's troubling you this time?"

"You know full well what's 'troubling' me, sir," Retsof growled. He waved his hands towards the crew beginning work.

"I have explained to you our position before," Tongru began, keeping his voice patient but inwardly tired of this debate. "Your deed clearly states that your property ends here, where we're standing. That field is

owned by the state, and always has been. They allowed you to build in this area, not vice versa."

"The state gives and the state takes away, does it?" Retsof retorted.

"I think we have been more than fair."

Retsof's eyes narrowed, and he frowned. "You really don't see this as desecration, do you?" he challenged. "You can't imagine the dead being kept from a peaceful rest."

"The dead? What is the burial ground to you?"

"I saw enough death in the East to make it my concern. Peace and quiet is something the living and the dead need."

"My concern is for the living," Tongru told him.

"Ah, yes. 'Progress.' Politicians and businessmen of the West always use that buzzword whenever they want

to destroy land for more buildings. Progress means improvement, not fuelling greed."

"You could have always stayed in the East, you know," Tongru said, losing some of his patience. "I'm sorry, but the discussion is over. So if you're not going to chain yourself to a builder, I suggest you leave. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but facts are facts."

He turned and flew away before Retsof could reply. Nevertheless, the otherman did reply, albeit to himself.

"There are facts you will be sorry to learn, Tongru. Facts indeed."

That night, Tongru and his mate had settled in for some needed rest. He had rolled over to his side, pulled the covers over his eyes, and was on the verge of falling to sleep. Retsof and the morning's business were almost forgotten.

Then, he heard the sound of crashing metal outside. Jumping up, he ran over to the window to see what had happened. Someone could be hurt, and he might need to call an ambulance.

To his surprise, however, the street in front of his upscale house was empty.

"What is it?" his mate asked lazily from the bed.

Tongru turned to her. He had married her several years ago, and found that she fit the trophy wife stereotype all too well. Younger and more attractive than he, she nevertheless had little interest or thought of anything other than her own wealth and comfort. Tongru stayed with her mostly out of habit, though she was usually agreeable enough.

"I heard a crash outside," he told her. "Did it wake you up too?"

“I didn’t hear anything,” she protested, covering back up. “Come back to bed.”

“I know I heard an accident,” he insisted, looking out the window again. “But where?”

“You just had a nightmare,” she mumbled from under the sheets.

Tongru continued to look at the window, and sighed. Maybe she was right; at any rate, continuing to argue would do no good. Nothing was there, and that was that. He went back to bed, and tried to get some sleep out of the night’s remainder.

Next morning, he checked on his workers’ progress.

“We’re starting work now sir,” the foreman told him.

“But it is well past midmorning,” Tongru noted. “Did Retsof give you any more trouble?”

“No, sir. We haven’t seen him at all today. But there was a wreck last night that needed to be cleared out.”

“A wreck?” Tongru echoed.

“Yes, sir. Late last night, one of our builders ran off the road and crashed. It’s been taken care of now.”

Tongru thanked the foreman. Now there was a coincidence, he thought. How could it be that he had had a nightmare so close to reality at nearly the same time?

Suddenly, the sound of builders starting up reached his ears. Startled, he looked over at the construction site. The work had indeed begun, and was loud as always. But now, to him, the loudness was different. It almost seemed to be coming from inside his head, as opposed to the outside world.

Soon, the sounds became a roar, and Tongru put his hands to his ears. The sound became a physical sensation, making him cry out and double over in pain.

"Sir? What's wrong?" the foreman asked, running back over. But Tongru could barely hear him; the sound continued relentlessly. His vision began to blur.

"Sir?!" the otherman continued to ask, but Tongru lost consciousness before he could answer.

When he came to, he found himself in a clean hospital room. A nurse was checking his vital signs, and nodded at him when she saw him awake. After telling him to relax, she went to get the attending physician.

"Good morning," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

"Not so good," Tongru answered truthfully. "My head hurts and everything is still fuzzy."

“Well, I shouldn’t wonder. You have been unconscious for two days,” the doctor told him. “Your foreman told us that you collapsed after shouting and holding your head.”

Tongru groaned and rubbed his head again. “I was hearing things, noises like the running of builders. Not the ones nearby. Ones in my head. That’s what made me pass out.”

The doctor frowned. “That is odd, because we could find nothing wrong with you. Your vital signs have all been relatively normal, as was your brain scan. Blood work and toxicology screening showed nothing either.”

The doctor looked at him and slowly seemed to consider his next words. “Tongru, you’ll forgive me, but have you had any history of this sort of thing? It almost sounds like an auditory hallucination.”

Tongru shook his head, still too dazed to take offense. "Doctor, the only other time this has happened was the other night. I had just had an argument with a man who protested our latest development. You know, the one where you found me?"

The doctor nodded. "You have been under considerable stress lately, haven't you sir?"

Tongru was coming out of the daze, and was beginning to see what was being implied. "I'm always busy," he said, somewhat shortly. "What of it? I'm not schizophrenic, paranoid, or simply crazy. I know what I've been hearing."

The doctor raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Of course. However, you may benefit from a leave of absence. To get some rest. No, you need not make a decision now. I will order a sedative for you and you can

think it over in the next few days. That's the best thing for you now."

The doctor left, unknowingly taking some of Tongru's certainty and confidence with him. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "What is happening to me?" he whispered to himself. "Am I going mad?"

"Not yet," a male voice called out.

Tongru looked up but saw no one. Scanning the single bed room, he looked around in vain for the speaker, but only confirmed his solitude. Was it another hallucination after all?

"Where are you?" Tongru asked, hesitantly.

"I'm here," the voice answered. "But I can't be seen. I haven't been among the living for some time."

"I don't understand," Tongru protested, sweat suddenly appearing on his brow.

“Oh, I think you do, sir,” the voice replied with an edge in its tone. “You are over the development that’s disturbing my rest.”

“The burial ground?”

“Just so.”

Tongru shook his head. “No. It can’t be.”

“We want you to end the development,” the voice told him. “Leave us in peace.”

“I can’t. I have my instructions.”

“That’s a pity. You see, noise while sleeping is most unpleasant,” the voice said. “This is what we are going to have to deal with every day and every night.”

Sounds of builders driving and moving heavy metal and stone entered his mind. He held his hands to his ears again, and began to protest, but to no avail. He could only hope the nurses would hear his screams and bring the sedative…

Alone at his home, Retsof pointed a cylinder shaped device at the construction site nearby. A cord connected it to a type of radio sitting on his table. The radio had a speaker that he could either talk into, or leave open to surrounding noise. Currently, it was picking up the builders' noise and transmitting it to Tongru in the hospital.

He had never, in fact, defected. Rather, he was a Deceiver for the East tasked with living in the West. While he didn't have the artificial eyes used to scope out potential information, he had something else.

His superiors had tasked him to find a test subject for what they hoped would be an artificial form of telepathy. Something that could be used to transmit instructions to agents in the field using only thought. But Retsof had had a better idea. Why not use such a

device to plant thoughts in enemy minds? Misinformation, 'hallucinations', things that would make them question everything around them? What a weapon that would be!

Retsof smiled slightly, and put the cylinder down next to the main unit. No one would ever suspect that such a thing existed. Tongru would simply be confined to a psych ward and that would be that. Once the technology was shrunken down enough to be implanted, as the electronic eyes were, his superiors would have a greater weapon to fight the West than any bomb could ever be.

"With the beginning of these devices from the East, the Thought War began," the pilot told the astounded humans. "Soldiers, Deceivers, traitors, all could fight just as much with telepathy as with artillery. With a

simple scan of brain waves, a fine tuning to harmonize with them, any thought could be implanted into any head. Including thoughts of homicide or suicide."

"Like us," Keisha guessed. "The voices in our heads."

"Yes."

"Only, some of us could resist. Some could hear that the inner voice we heard wasn't our own."

"So it was Before. So it was that some survived."

"But I don't understand," Aaron said. "The othermen you've been showing us seem more like us. Like individuals. Where was the queen in those days?"

"There was none," the Pilot confirmed.

"How did you know about the other two, Tongru and Retsof?" Aaron asked.

"The Deceiver Retsof was captured and interrogated in time," the Pilot explained. "However, by then it was

too late. The technology was deployed by both East and West. When the dust cleared, most of both civilizations were gone."

Arachne walked to the end of the room and hit a button. Another door opened, and she led the humans to another chamber. This one was an operating room, with a bed and surgical equipment. Aaron and the others would have liked to have had a lesson in the physiology of the othermen, but apparently this was to be another part of their history lesson.

Then they noticed on one of the beds was none other than Ellis Harlan.

“Harlan?” Aaron said.

He looked at Ranyos again, who nodded. “We captured him so that I could take his place. Duplicating his appearance was difficult, but as you saw, not

impossible. We have kept him in a deliberate coma while we probed his mind for more information on your world.”

“Then he still lives?”

“He does.” The Pilot hit a few buttons on a panel. Ellis, the real Ellis, slowly opened his eyes. He sat up groggily, and then his eyes widened when he saw the strange surroundings. He opened his mouth to cry out, but Aaron and the others came to his bedside to calm him down.

“It’s ok, Ellis,” Aaron assured him. “We’re all here.”

Arachne continued the discourse, more for the others than for the dazed Ellis Harlan.

"It was decided that in order for the othermen to survive, a new otherman would be needed," the queen said. "One where individuals and groups were balanced. The East had put more emphasis on the group, the West on the individual. The survivors on both

sides came together to seek a balance. They hormonally and genetically altered their offspring so that males and females would be bound to one leader, one mother. One queen. The other females became workers, to nurture and care for the group. The males became drones, to provide for and protect the group. Their intelligence is intact, but bred into them is a strong sense of obedience. Of submission. Thus, the Society came to be."

"Sounds like you sacrificed freedom," Keisha ventured.

"Freedom? What freedom? The freedom to oppress? To exploit? To make war? To murder? Surely such things are not freedom."

"But you are the one saying it."

"Of course. I am the queen. It is what I was bred for. It is why I am."

"But what of innovation? Of advancement?" Aaron interrupted. "The world Before, as you put it, seemed far more advanced."

"Yes. We took the world to a simpler time. It took many years for flora and fauna to grow healthy again. The Scavengers and crocodiles were bred to help destroy the remaining wreckage and clear debris.

“We were devoted to cleaning and purifying our ruined world in those days. That is when we began to expose our dead on raised platforms, rather than bury them underground. Decay and filth became anathema to us. It became for us part of what you would call religion. Eventually the crocodiles were used to guard the burial sites and the Scavengers were released into the western plains."

"Some of the technology from Before was kept," the Pilot said. "I survived, and we kept the mechanical

seeing eyes. Each queen has had one. We also used the thought device to help Ranyos and Arachne learn your language. Fortunately it was never developed enough to be implantable. But it has a range, so we had to bring it out in the open to capture you.”

"You couldn’t have known if it would work on us or not," Aaron pointed out.

"No. And putting thoughts into another's mind hasn't been done for ages. Nor was it necessary to."

"The second crisis was the Thought War," the Pilot told them. "Now we are facing a third crisis. You. What are we to do with you?"

The humans grew nervous. It was true that they had been spared for the moment, but would that remain so? Clearly, the othermen were adamant about defending their world. Would that be at their expense?

The othermen helped Ellis to his feet, and then they escorted the humans out of the room. They were shown to quarters that had a couple of drones standing guard. While they weren't mistreated, it was clear that they were prisoners.

XVII

"We cannot keep them here forever," the Pilot offered.

"No," Arachne agreed.

They had kept the humans in their makeshift cell for three days. In that time, they had also gathered up the corpses of the other humans. While enemies, the othermen still had great aversion to bodies being left to rot without proper ceremony. The remainder of Erebus they had burned, and then used the site to make a burial ground for the alien corpses.

But the danger remained of other humans following in their footsteps. As the Pilot had pointed out, they didn’t know about the capabilities of the humans. It was entirely possible that they possessed weapons far stronger than what they had shown thus far.

Ranyos had directed some of her workers and drones to study the bodies carefully, learning every detail. He had also had the human bodies stripped of their clothing and dog tags.

For what purpose, the Pilot wasn’t sure, but thought he was beginning to suspect.

“Our lives have been dedicated to keeping things as they are,” the queen continued.

“The humans back home will be getting suspicious,” the Pilot said.

“Hence why I have had some of our people studying the dead humans,” Ranyos said. “They have returned

here to reverse cocoon. I also have some studying the survivors. I can imitate the one called Ellis Harlan."

"So you are sending some of our people…"

"Into the human's world. Yes. They can report on what they find there and plan accordingly."

"You are sure you can do this?" the Pilot asked.

Arachne looked at Ranyos, who nodded. "I have trained as a Deceiver. I was easily moving among them before. I will succeed now."

After another few days, the impersonators were ready. Emerging from their cocoons, they donned the stolen clothes, returned to the site of Erebus and activated the returned gateway. They positioned it away from the human corpses now lying on makeshift platforms of their own, and hoped the humans wouldn't notice the change in direction.

“Harlan? Is that you?”

The othermen saw a room with several metal objects. It reminded them a little of the Pilot’s room. Were the humans, then, comparable to the othermen as they had been Before? If so, how dangerous were they?

Ranyos addressed the human who had spoken to them, a younger male with a concerned expression on his face. Next to him was what he assumed was a female, although she had some type of frame like device over her eyes.

“I apologize for the delay. The equipment stopped working. I had to repair it.”

“How? Why?”

“I don’t know. But I think it would be best if we all returned.”

The man speaking to them licked his lips, hesitantly. “Well, I’m not in charge. What do Carter and Proctor think?”

Two othermen, disguised as the fallen leaders, stepped forward. “I think we need to go through the gateway and make our next decisions,” ‘Carter’ said. “What do we need to do?”

“Well, just come through, like you did before.”

He seemed a little surprised to be telling them that. Ranyos looked around. While they had learned the human’s language and some of their customs from the Pilot probing the real Harlan’s brain, the nuances of everything would take some getting used to. Yes, the information had been transmitted to their minds using the thought device. Yes, their disguises would imitate the humans, especially if not examined too closely. Still,

it was another thing to actually use and live the new knowledge.

Ranyos took a step forward, and walked through the portal. On the other side, he found a place with similar temperature and pressure to Somnus. That was a relief, although they figured that that would be the case, given that the humans had acclimated to Somnus without visible distress.

More othermen came through, and the young man walked up to them. “Is everything all right?” he asked, clearly concerned. “First we didn’t hear from you, and now you seem a little shaky.”

“I’m okay…” Ranyos trailed off. Mentally, he was sifting through the memories that had been extracted from Harlan and placed in all of them. “Arthur? Arthur Takamori?”

“Yes, it’s me,” the younger man confirmed. “Dr. Harlan, I really think you need to go to the infirmary. Along with all of the others.”

“Yes. I agree,” Ranyos said. He looked over at his fellows. “Come with me to the infirmary.”

“Yes sir,” ‘Proctor’ said.

Arthur raised his eyebrow. “You’re getting Seth Proctor to take your orders? What happened there?”

“Hmm? Nothing. Again, equipment failure. I’m sure Proctor trusts me. And you, of course.”

“Why are your clothes in such bad shape?” Dr. Wilkinson asked.

Ranyos looked down. Indeed, both his outfit and many of the others had tears, bullet holes and blood stains.

“Exploring another world proves more dangerous than we thought,” he confessed. “There are creatures in the river…”

“Othermen?” Arthur asked.

“No, not othermen. Some kind of crocodile. They’re hostile and territorial.”

“And some of you were bitten?” Dr. Wilkinson interrupted. “By something alien?!”

Ranyos looked at her. Rachel Wilkinson. That was her name. The thing she wore on her face was called ‘glasses.’ Apparently it was meant to correct a defect in sight. While he processed this information, Rachel assumed he was merely dazed, and kept talking.

“You all need to get into quarantine right away!” she cried. “Starting with you!”

Rachel and Arthur quickly went to the decontamination room. After scrubbing up and donning

protective gear, they herded Ranyos, whom they thought was Ellis Harlan, into the room to do likewise. Then they led him to the infirmary.

Another decontamination followed, and Ranyos entered one of the glass walled hospital beds. Sitting down, he looked up at Rachel. The physician checked his pulse, heart rate and blood pressure. Then she directed him to undress.

“Is that really necessary?” Ranyos asked. He typically didn’t see the humans unclothed. Furthermore, while the memories extracted from the real Harlan contained recent medical examinations, he still wasn’t sure what was or wasn’t normal.

“You know it is, Ellis,” Rachel answered.

Ranyos looked at her. Their eyes locked and Rachel took a step back. Something was wrong with those eyes. While they looked perfectly normal, there was a feeling,

an indescribable feeling, that there was something off. Rachel found herself thinking that this wasn't Ellis Harlan.

Then he dropped his gaze, and shrugged nonchalantly. "Of course, doctor."

He took off his clothes and Rachel saw that he had changed physically as well. The back seemed bonier and more prominent, despite no apparent loss of weight. His skin color was normal, but the texture felt rougher to the touch. Moreover, his body hair had vanished except for on his scalp.

"Ellis," she began. Her hands felt his back, felt the bony ridge and dry skin. "What happened? Did all this happen after you were attacked?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"Where were you bitten?" she asked, looking him over. She saw no bite marks or cuts on him. She looked

at his tattered clothes, and couldn't tell from them either.

"I'm not sure. Arms, I think. Or maybe a bullet just grazed me. It was pretty chaotic there for awhile."

"I'm sure." She turned to Arthur. "Start sending them in. We'll need to quarantine and take blood cultures."

It took several hours but eventually the team from Somnus was all gathered together in the ward. Rachel had ordered the clothing incinerated and newer clothes provided. Examinations proved that they all were in essentially the same condition as Harlan. No visible wounds, but alterations in their skin texture.

At Arthur's suggestion, they had all taken up One Ship again and were taking turns playing. Arthur and Rachel couldn't help but notice that all of them had gotten much worse than they had been before spending

time on Somnus. Even Ellis took several attempts to reach the boss alien again.

“How do you do this?” he demanded after being killed onscreen again.

“Why aren’t you using the hidden weapon?” Arthur asked, watching play through the glass.

“What weapon?”

Arthur frowned. “Go to the left of the screen.”

Ranyos complied and found himself better armed. He admitted that the novelty of this experience interested him. Entertainment on Somnus, such as it was, leaned more towards taking short trips around the planet or talking with others. Even the Pilot’s room only had machines that were useful. He wondered if such things had existed Before.

Arthur laughed nervously. “Did you forget?”

“Yeah,” Ranyos told him. “Must be brain mist…err… fog.”

“Right…”

XVIII

That evening, Rachel found Arthur in the cafeteria. The head technician was getting a cup of coffee, and looking pensive. She got one herself and sat down next to him. He smiled slightly and nodded.

“Some of the other technicians are monitoring the portal,” he offered. “We put a new one through to Somnus and retrieved the original one.”

“Any damage?” she asked, sipping her coffee.

He shook his head. “No. And granted, they fixed the issue to get back here in the first place. But still. When

I asked Harlan what exactly went wrong, he didn't really answer me."

"What did he say?"

"Some vague stuff about wires shorting out." He shook his head. "Rachel, he knows more about this than I do. He was my mentor at MIT. Now he acts like he barely knows anything. He didn't even know the cheat code on One Ship, the one he suggested I add."

"I know what you mean." She put her hand on Arthur's, sensing that he was upset over his old friend. Like him, she didn't know what to do either. "I looked into Ellis' eyes. And…well…I somehow felt like I was looking at a stranger. To say nothing of the skin conditions."

"Do you think they're infected with something? Are the cultures back yet?"

“No. I can’t find any external evidence of infection beyond the skin changes, though. Their vitals are all a little off. Heart beat and pulse are up, temperatures slightly down. But nothing that would make me worried if not for the fact that they spent a couple weeks on another planet.”

“What if it’s not infections? Maybe it’s radiation; Somnus orbits a completely different star. Or some toxin in the atmosphere. Or…”

She laughed softly, her blue eyes wistful behind the glasses. “Or who knows? How many times has a new discovery turned everything we think we know on its head?”

“I wonder.” Arthur looked at the cafeteria door. “Are we meant to leave our world?”

The tests came back, revealing good and bad news. The good news was that Dr. Wilkinson could find no trace of bacterial or viral infection. So fortunately, it would seem that no alien diseases were going to infect Earth.

The bad news was that the team's cells no longer looked human. Animal, yes. But not human. Dr. Wilkinson didn't know what they were.

So that raised the question. Had the Somnus team been somehow mutated? And if so, would it have an effect on the other humans in the compound as well? Or was there another answer?

When Arthur told Harlan, his friend looked up at him in shock and worry.

"What's happening to me, Arthur?" Ranyos, disguised as Harlan, asked. "Is this why I've been having memory lapses?"

“It could be,” Arthur guessed. “I don’t know.” He studied Harlan. “Has it gotten worse?”

“I remember pretty well up until…Oakwood?”

Ranyos had been going over Harlan’s memories in his mind. He knew he would have to convince them of his identity, so he concentrated hard, trying to focus on the alien experiences. He saw a town called Oakwood, and attempts to build portals there. He saw the more recent experiments in this very compound. Furthermore, he had made a point of mentioning it all to Arthur Takamori, to ensure that the human would continue to believe that he was, in fact, Ellis Harlan.

“Maybe if I could refresh my memory. Is there any information I could read?”

Arthur showed him how to access the laptop. From there, he could see an online encyclopedia. The

disguised othermen spent hours reading on every subject they could think of.

"And you're certain everything is all right there?"

'Seth Proctor' was on the telephone to his superiors in Washington. Once the othermen had gotten sufficient information to understand how the humans communicated with one another, they had gotten in touch with the humans' masters.

Although they essentially didn't use technology apart from the Pilot, they were familiar with what had come Before. Indeed, with the thought device, this 'telephone' appeared rather primitive by comparison.

"Yes sir. As we already reported, one of the portals had some shorted wires. I'm having the technicians examining the other equipment as we speak."

“And you’re certain everyone is accounted for?” the government agent asked.

“We are. However, all of us are suffering from some kind of dry skin condition.”

“We’ve read Dr. Wilkinson’s report. But you say your memory problems are improving?”

“Yes. I’m hoping that our skin will heal with time, too. While we can’t be sure, the current theory is radiation sickness.”

“Keep us informed of everything. Until then, consider yourselves still under quarantine.”

“We understand. Proctor out.”

He hung up the phone and walked out of Proctor’s office. Down the hall was the main room. Ranyos and the otherman impersonating Jay Carter were directing the humans to start taking apart the portals.

Arthur Takamori was downloading the schematics onto a flash drive. Then, at ‘Carter’s’ direction, he deleted the information off of his hard drive.

“Make sure it isn’t able to be recovered,” Ranyos instructed. “Even by the best slasher.”

“Hacker,” Arthur corrected, frowning. “Don’t worry, Ellis, I know what to do.”

Ranyos smiled, not sincerely enough to fully reassure him. “I know you do, Arthur. But we have our orders to keep these discoveries as secret as possible.”

He held out his hand, and Arthur gave him the flash drive. Then the younger technician left to check on Rachel. She was still caring for a few of the others who had returned from Somnus. While about half of them were out and about, the others, including ‘Aaron,’ remained in the infirmary, apparently unwell.

He looked in alarm at the patients on their beds. Not only were they immobile, but they were covered with a thin filmy substance. He couldn't tell whether any of them were breathing.

"Rachel? What's happening?"

She turned from where she had been examining a patient. She and the orderlies had apparently been trying to scrape the stuff off of the bodies. It was flaking off, but while they had managed to get some of it off, it barely made a difference. The film was beginning to harden into a shell and consequently became harder to remove.

"I don't know," she said, exasperated. "They just started, I don't know. Whatever this is."

"It almost looks like some kind of cocooning," Arthur remarked.

"Yes it does," Rachel agreed. "I wonder…"

She went to her computer and began searching online. “I’m pulling up some records,” she told him without turning around. “I still have contacts at the medical school. I’m asking for them to send me any images of insect cells the biology department may have. The undergraduate lab had all kinds of anatomical and physiological records.”

“Do you think they’re mutating into…”

“At this point, nothing surprises me,” Rachel said grimly. “Assuming these really are our people.”

“What, you think they’re aliens?” Arthur protested. “But we haven’t seen any intelligent life there the whole time we’ve been watching Somnus.”

“How can we be sure?” Rachel asked quietly, almost timidly.

XIX

On Somnus, the real Aaron Adams and Ellis Harlan languished in a cell with the other survivors. While Arachne had kept them fed and had avoided mistreating them, she had also made no move to release them. None of them could say just what the othermen were planning.

They looked up as the Pilot entered the cell, carrying a sphere shaped metal object. Harlan had seen such a thing before in the Pilot's chamber, but didn't know what its purpose was.

"Ranyos is completing his survey of your home base," he told the humans. "He has pulled the information on your portals and will then erase the data. Never again will you be able to come here."

He held up the sphere. "This is a device from Before. It is a disintegration bomb. Ranyos will execute any remaining humans there and then activate this. It will destroy the building and everything inside."

“What about us?” Aaron asked. “Will you kill us too?”

“You will remain here, indefinitely. Perhaps, in time, you will be allowed to leave and live among the Outliers. That will depend on how you conduct yourselves.”

“For the last time, Pilot, we aren’t a threat,” Harlan insisted. “Just let us go. I can…”

“It remains possible, even probable, that you have the information elsewhere. We must be sure.” The Pilot hesitated. “I am sorry for any innocent death, if innocent you are. But my loyalty is to the Society. It must be preserved at all costs.”

“Is it though?” Aaron pressed. “Don’t the presence of the Outliers suggest that the Society is waning? That the othermen may be reverting back? You can’t engineer change with biology. Not any more than in politics.

Where is your Society then? Worry about your own affairs, and we will worry about ours. Let us go."

The Pilot hesitated. "I'm sorry," he repeated. Then he left.

"So we're never going to see home again," another human moaned.

"Keep up hope," Keisha said. "There's always hope."

She looked around and pulled the walkie talkie out of her boot. "The othermen didn't search me thoroughly enough. I still have this."

"What good can that do? Harlan asked. "There's no one to communicate with."

"Not yet. But if anyone else comes through a portal to try and rescue us, they'll probably try to call it."

Aaron nodded. "There's always hope," he repeated. They had to believe that.

Ranyos received the bomb from the Pilot. The robot flew into the monitor's view, having been equipped with the ability after he had been rescued from space. While initially surprised to see him, he had had the situation explained to him. Arachne was taking no chances.

Not that it mattered. He had the data he needed from this compound, and had given the Pilot the flash drive. He had little doubt that the Pilot could reverse engineer the device in time. He had already understood much of it from examining the initial device. With that power, the Society would have a new tool, new opportunities. They would no longer be stagnating.

As the Pilot flew off into the distance, the disguised othermen in the room were directed by Ranyos to reenter the portal and return to Somnus. Soon, the drone became the only otherman left, except for those in

the infirmary. He turned to retrieve them and give their new orders.

The humans must be killed.

Rachel and Arthur were still in the infirmary when Ranyos came in.

“Dr Harlan?” Arthur asked. The tone conveyed doubt, uncertainty. Ranyos realized that the human was beginning to suspect.

In a way, Ranyos wasn’t surprised. This human, Arthur, was intelligent, good natured and clear minded. The otherman could have been starting to like him, as he had almost liked Aaron Adams.

Ranyos arched back his head and bellowed in a voice that Arthur could only describe as inhuman. For the first time in his life, that word seemed to have meaning beyond the rhetorical.

What ‘Harlan’ said, he had no idea. But the other, cocooned othermen, responded. They stirred, and Rachel put a hand to her mouth as every person lying down seemed to split open. Then what was inside sat up and she saw the othermen for what they were.

Backing into a wall, Rachel pulled the fire alarm. It screeched over the loud speakers, causing the othermen to startle. Some clasped their heads, as if in pain. Others flew up and flitted about, their surprise making them look like the animals they had pretended to be.

But it got the result she wanted. The military guards came.

They pulled out their handguns and started shooting at the othermen. The bullets didn’t harm them, and Ranyos turned on the humans. Some of the bullets grazed him, and the humans could see that instead of blood, underneath was otherman skin.

“These things aren’t our people!” Arthur yelled to the military men.

He heard Rachel cry out and turned back to her. An otherman had landed back on the ground and was approaching her. Without hesitating, he leapt on its back and began to wrestle with it. The otherman was far stronger and hurled him off.

Arthur hit the wall, dazed. Rachel ran over to him and helped him up. The technician was badly bruised but had managed to avoid breaking any bones.

Ranyos, meanwhile, shouted again and directed the othermen to chase after the military guard, who had fled down the hall. He approached Arthur and Rachel, while the man stood. Arthur pulled Rachel behind him and faced Ranyos.

The otherman hesitated. In this simple act, he recognized something. The human showed willingness

to risk, perhaps even lay down his life for another. It was something he understood; the Society, and the life of a queen was worth more than the life of a drone.

Ranyos backed away, not taking his eyes off the two humans. For although he thought he understood them better with each new insight, they were still aliens. They had invaded and were the latest crisis. Arachne and the Pilot had assured them of this. How they dealt with the next few moments may well determine everything.

When the otherman left, Rachel and Arthur looked at one another. Supporting Arthur, Rachel walked out of the now empty infirmary. They heard gunfire, and had to press against the wall to avoid fleeing othermen. The military men were chasing them, having found that larger weapons could in fact hurt them.

Machine gun fire whizzed past them, hitting the last otherman in the back. It collapsed and the military

continued to chase them down the hall. Arthur and Rachel followed.

Inside the lab, the humans closed in on the othermen. One by one, they flew back through the portal. Ranyos looked over his shoulder. The humans closed in just as the sphere continued to increase in brightness.

While they hadn't learned much, they had learned that they weren't invincible on this planet. That meant that the future was far more uncertain. They would have to plan the next time more carefully.

The soldiers came up just as Ranyos reached the gate. Then they saw the glowing sphere. Panicked, they ran, for they knew what it was. A weapon. Insurance that the othermen couldn't be followed.

But Arthur, almost without thinking, kicked the thing at the portal. It went through and detonated. An

explosion struck the Somnus ground, but its effect didn’t cross over to Earth. The portal on Somnus, of course, was vaporized as well, and the screen went dark.

XX

“That was either the bravest or stupidest thing you could have done,” Rachel said, shaken.

Arthur ran a hand through his hair and grinned sheepishly. “Yeah.”

Ranyos, meanwhile, was being held at gunpoint by the other humans. He had seen that the weapons here could hurt him, so he remained still. His mind raced, wondering what to do. How could he turn this to his advantage?

He had seen in the human investigations an opportunity for advancement. After all the time in stagnation, he felt they represented a means to progress. Perhaps, or perhaps not. Still, he wanted to see if he

could use the humans here to achieve his true goal. Bringing the Outliers and Society back together, with or without Arachne's approval.

"You," Arthur addressed him. "Who are you? What are you? Where are our people?"

The military men didn't argue with Takamori taking the lead. With their superiors lost on Somnus, they supposed that the next senior scientist would be the one in charge, and were more than happy to have him take the initiative. Or the blame, should things get even worse than they already were.

"I am called Ranyos," the otherman answered. "I am here on behalf of the Society to investigate you, the invaders of our home."

"What is the Society?" Arthur asked.

"It is all of us, those you call othermen."

"What about the other humans? Harlan, Adams?"

“Some of them are dead. Taken down because they represented a possible threat to us. Harlan and a few others still live, the prisoners of the Society and the queen.”

“When did you do that? We were getting regular progress reports.”

“We impersonated your fellow humans. You saw our abilities firsthand.”

“What would it take to get them back?”

“I have taken down your information and dismantled all your portals save this one.” Ranyos pointed to the one next to them. “The othermen now control the means to come and go from here to our home. Your fellows will remain as hostages until we can be sure of our safety.”

He paused. “Unless, that is, if you are willing to strike a bargain.”

“What kind of bargain?”

Ranyos paused. Should he play his hand now? He might not have another chance. It was risky, using the aliens, but if he played this right, perhaps he could have them fight against the Society for him. He could bring back the Outliers and remove Arachne.

“Come with me to my world. Help me rescue some othermen whom I care for. If you succeed, I will do what I can to free your friends.”

Rachel took Arthur aside. “Don’t tell me you trust him,” she said quietly.

“Of course not. But what choice do we have?”

“Cut our losses. Send him away and get help from Washington. We’re in over our heads here.”

Arthur looked from her to Ranyos to the portal. “I know,” he admitted. “But there might not be any time. I can go with some of the soldiers. You can stay here and monitor…”

She was shaking her head. “Listen,” he insisted. “When Ranyos leaves, you can get one of the other portals back together. Some of the other techs can do it for you. Then, if we don’t succeed in a day or so, or if it looks like more othermen are coming…”

He swallowed before continuing. “In that case, deactivate everything and get help.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Trust me, Rachel.”

She sighed. “All right. We’ll try it your way. Be careful.”

He turned back to Ranyos and the guards. “Two of the men will go through first. Then, Ranyos, you follow. I’ll then come with a few others. If you fly away or try any tricks, they’ll shoot you.”

He looked at the men, who nodded their agreement. They stepped through the portal. Ranyos walked

through in silence, followed by Arthur and a few other guards.

The human scientist craned his neck to look at the red sky and feel the wind of an alien world on his face. Despite the situation they found themselves in, he felt some of the same awe and fear that Harlan and Adams had. While it was only a few days, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Looking around, they saw that the bomb had left a crater in the ground. Arthur thought he saw some twisted metal and bits of canvas that marked where Erebus had been. Several yards away, he noted that there were several dead humans resting face up on mounds of dirt. He wondered why, and took a step forward, but Ranyos shook his head.

“As I said, your closest friends aren’t there.”

“Where are they? Where is this ‘Society’ as you call it?”

“To the east. But our business takes us to the west.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I said that all the othermen were there. That is not entirely true. There are some we call Outliers, who live to the west.”

“Another community?”

“Exiles. Long ago, there was a war that nearly wiped out our people. The survivors changed their biology to make it so they were united in one Society. One queen, a group of male soldiers and a group of sterile female workers.”

He remembered the insect tissue samples. So they were a type of insect, akin to termites or ants or something like that. Rachel would be fascinated. So

was he, although biology wasn't his area of expertise. Ranyos continued.

"Some of our numbers have reverted back to what we were like Before. Individual males and females. Like you and your mate."

He flushed. "Rachel isn't my mate."

"Ah. Well, they are the Outliers and because they don't fit into the Society, they live on the fringes of our world. I want to bring them back into the Society, but the queen refuses."

"How are we supposed to help with that?"

"You are an element she won't expect. Perhaps if we join forces, we can both rescue your friends and the Outliers."

He led them west, towards the abandoned city. The humans followed, keeping him covered with their

weapons. This forced Ranyos to walk instead of fly, but he was unconcerned. His bold strategy just may work.

XXI

“What are they doing?” Arachne asked the Pilot.

She had been watching the othermen drones returning through the portal. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. But before Ranyos could come back, she saw the disintegration bomb come back through and detonate.

It had momentarily blinded her, but when she was able to see again, Ranyos was back on Somnus with some other humans. Her eyes could see them, even miles away, but she couldn’t hear them. The humans were threatening him with what appeared to be larger weapons, and then they began marching west, towards the desert.

“I cannot say,” the Pilot confessed. “It would seem that some of the humans have captured him.”

“Yes, but Ranyos assured us that the other portals were destroyed. Even if the humans were to build another, wouldn’t it be in the same spot where they first appeared?” Arachne said. “And why is Ranyos leading them towards the Outliers? We have no dealings with them.”

Ranyos had once come to her and wanted to reintegrate the Outliers with the Society. Years ago, during his Deceiver training, he had infiltrated the group. It was his final test to see if he could truly spy on others without them suspecting him. He had lived among them for several weeks.

Then, a Scavenger attack occurred. Ranyos had been wounded, but helped the Outliers fight their larger cousins off. After he had returned, Ranyos had changed.

He told her that the Outliers, rather than being seen as mistakes or atavisms, should be embraced as brothers and sisters.

Arachne had quickly suppressed any discussion of that idea. They had survived the years after the Thought War by becoming what they were now. If some othermen were beginning to revert, it could only mean the potential for repeating the mistakes of the past. Ranyos had argued, had accused them of stagnation, but Arachne had held firm. Ranyos dropped the issue, but things were never the same between them. Drones were supposed to be loyal, unquestioning, and loving towards their queen. Ranyos had been obedient, but cooler and more distant than some of the others.

Despite that, his intelligence and strength were things she didn't question. The last thing she wanted to do was lose him.

“Perhaps he is trying to lure them to the Scavengers,” the Pilot suggested.

“If that is the case, it’s a dangerous gambit. We will send some drones to follow behind them. Out of the aliens’ sight for now. We’ll wait for them to let their guard down.”

The Scavengers still prowled in the dried seabed. The humans hesitated, not wanting to engage the large creatures, but Ranyos went up to them. The humans wondered what the meaning of this was.

The giant othermen were hunched over another one of their dead, beginning their funeral feast. Ranyos hailed them and spoke words of peace in the othermen’s own language. While the humans couldn’t understand, and the Scavengers’ minds were rudimentary, they had enough memory to recognize Ranyos as an ally. The

Deceiver had travelled to and from the ruined city enough times that he was familiar in these lands.

He went up and took a piece of recently dead flesh. Slowly, he raised it to his mouth and took a bite. He tried to ignore the inherent sense of revulsion. Most othermen had as much aversion to eating their own as most humans. But it was necessary here, and he waved the humans over after swallowing.

“These are the Scavengers,” he explained. “They can help us attack the Society, but if they are to help you, then you must become their brothers.”

“How do we do that?” Arthur asked.

“Take and eat. Then they will see you as part of their world and part of them.”

Takamori didn’t want to, not knowing if he even could eat the food of Somnus. Granted the other humans

had eaten fruits and vegetables, but meat was another matter entirely. Not that they had any better ideas.

Slowly the humans chewed a few bites of the dead Scavenger. The taste was both rancid and pungent, and Arthur had to choke it down. Fortunately, the humans had more sense than to spit it out, although some of them would become ill when they returned to Earth.

The Scavengers cheered and swatted the humans on the back. While the gesture was meant to be friendly, they were knocked to the ground. The military stood back up and both Arthur and Ranyos had to quickly soothe them to keep them from firing.

“Climb onto their backs,” Ranyos said, after speaking a few more words to the Scavengers. “They will take us to the city and Outliers.”

“Are the others there?” Arthur asked.

“No, but we will need reinforcements if you really want to free them.”

They arrived at the city, and were joined by the Outliers. Ranyos explained his plans to both groups.

“Your fellows were subdued by the thought machine Arachne and the Pilot possess,” Ranyos explained. “That is how they overwhelmed them.”

“What is that?” Arthur asked.

“A weapon that plants thoughts into another. It was what led to the war Before. In the years since, it has simply been used to impart knowledge faster than conventional teaching. But it was weaponized once more to take care of the first humans. They mostly killed each other; we had very little, if anything to do.”

“Then humans are clearly as vulnerable as you,” Arthur pointed out. “How exactly are we supposed to fight against such a weapon?”

“Some of your humans resisted. Just as some othermen can resist. Indeed, it isn’t as powerful as it once was, because the most susceptible othermen died in the war. We are all descended from the stronger, more resistant minds.”

“Granted. But still, is there anything else we can rely on? I’d feel better going into a battle with more than willpower.”

“I think so. We have little ‘technology’ as you call it. Most of it was lost in the war. But didn’t electronic devices have something called ‘interference?’ Your communication devices could run static and try to disrupt the signals of the thought machines.”

Arthur thought about that. It was certainly possible. He would prefer to have the time and ability to run tests. But there was no time or opportunity for experimentation.

“Let’s see.” He pulled out his walkie talkie and had the other military men do the same. They ran through several frequencies and talked to one another on them.

XXII

From Keisha’s boot, Harlan, Aaron and the handful of others heard static. Looking at each other and then at

the door, they had her pull out her walkie talkie. To their surprise, relief and fear, they heard human voices.

“This is Arthur Takamori,” they heard a familiar voice call. “Is anyone there?”

“Arthur?” Keisha whispered tensely into the speaker. “Arthur, it’s Keisha Thomas. Do you read?”

“Anyone?” Arthur asked, amidst a new burst of static.

“I don’t think he can hear,” Aaron said.

“But he’s somewhere on Somnus,” Keisha said. “He has to be. And probably not very far away either. The range on these things is only a few…”

The door opened. The Pilot and othermen guards came in. Keisha tried to hide her device behind her back, but she wasn’t fast enough.

“I detected something I haven’t in ages,” the Pilot told them. “An artificial transmission. It is you. Give the device to me.”

The othermen moved in threateningly. The humans groaned, but had no choice. The robot confiscated it, and left them all locked in their cell. He headed straight for Arachne’s chamber and presented it to her.

“I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised,” the queen remarked, turning the walkie talkie over in her hands. “We saw them come over, with Ranyos as their hostage. I lost sight of them in the ruined city.”

Then they heard Ranyos’ voice.

“This should help us disrupt the thought machines,” the drone was saying. “Then we have a fairer chance at a fight. We can subdue the other drones without too much trouble, especially since they won’t expect anything like that.”

“What?” Arachne asked the Pilot. “Did you hear?”

“Yes,” the robot said.

She was just about to question if it could possibly be what it sounded like. After all, Ranyos was a Deceiver. Surely he was just deceiving the humans, making them think they had a chance of victory, should they actually attempt an attack or rescue.

Then, an Outlier voice spoke. “Ranyos, we have waited patiently ever since you first lived among us. You promised that you would find a way to reintegrate us into the Society. Even if you had to go against the queen’s wishes.”

“And I will keep that promise today,” Ranyos said. “I have you, the Scavengers, the humans, and the humans’ secrets. We can steer our people in a new direction, after years of stagnation. Arachne will have no choice but to obey me. Unless she wishes to be replaced.”

“I care for you, Ranyos,” the Outlier voice, a female spoke. “I have for a long time now.”

“And I for you, Ariadne,” Ranyos answered. “Ever since you and yours saved me from the Scavengers. It has been a long, hard road. But I think we are at the end of it. We will leave a couple of the aliens’ devices here, just in case. If we fail, the Society won’t be able to use the thought device to retaliate. But we won’t fail.”

These last few exchanges were in the othermen’s native language, so none of the humans could understand it. But Arachne and the Pilot understood all too well.

XXIII

The Scavengers carried the humans and Outliers across the terrain to the Society. While they were incapable of flight, due to their weight, they could run fast for their size, and traversed the distance in a little

under a day. Soon, the hive where the Society lived loomed on the horizon.

Drones also filled the sky overhead. When the drones saw the invaders, they swooped down, ready to attack. The humans fired their guns, while the Scavengers and Outliers fought hand to hand with the drones.

Arthur watched as Ranyos joined the fight. He wrestled with another drone, but his would-be victim called for help. About half a dozen other drones came up and surrounded Ranyos. Grabbing him, they flew him into the structure. He thrashed and cried out, but they took him inside.

As Ranyos was taken in, Arachne stepped out, flanked by the Pilot and other drones. The Pilot held the thought machine, and activated it. They didn’t waste words; as far as they were concerned, the invaders could

kill themselves as they did before. True, they had heard them say something about resisting the machine, but hoped that they would be proven wrong.

Arthur felt the urge to attack the nearest thing, which happened to be a Scavenger. The sight of the larger being cured him of that, and he ran away. But he saw that some of the humans and Outliers were struggling to do the same. Indeed, some of them were attacking each other.

He remembered the walkie talkie and pulled it out. Turning it on, he blared static as loud as it would go. His mind then began to clear. Inspired, he ran back towards his fellows.

Their heads seemed to clear, and he shouted for them to follow his lead. Soon, white noise filled the air, and the effect of the thought machine was nullified. Arachne saw this, and fear crossed her face. She hadn’t

believed that the thought machine could be countered, for she had never faced opposition before. Worse, the Outliers back at the ruined city also supposedly had one of the human walkie talkies. Her legendary advantage suddenly disappeared.

Shrieking, she called for her drones to surround her. Arthur ordered the other humans to point their weapons at the otherman queen. He knew the humans would have to act quickly, while the Society was still reeling from these new developments.

“Where are our companions?” he demanded. “Release them, and we won’t harm you.”

“Inside. Spare us, alien! The Society must not fall!”

“The Society is already falling,” Arthur said. “These Outliers prove it.”

He looked over his shoulder at them. “What about them? Will you welcome them back into your home?

That’s all they ask. That was apparently what Ranyos wanted.”

“What is that to you? This is not your world, alien. As for Ranyos, he broke one of our greatest laws. He deceived his leader. He will be punished.”

“Then I ask you again, return our people to us. We’ll then leave. I don’t mind telling you that I left some of the communicators with the Outliers. You won’t be able to retaliate against them without a real fight. I don’t think you will.”

Arachne’s eyes narrowed, but Arthur kept on. “I’ve not seen much of your world, but I think you’re afraid. Afraid of any change, any challenge. Well, we aren’t. So give us back our people.”

Arachne made some command in her own language. The men tightened their grips on their guns, but saw that Adams, Harlan, Thomas and a few others were

brought out. The fellow humans walked warily towards their rescuers. Neither othermen nor human trusted each other. If there was to be any further contact between Somnus and Earth, some type of relationship would need to be established.

Arthur had the Outliers and Scavengers take them back to the site of Erebus. Then, he waited, hoping Rachel would see them. When a portal appeared in front of them, they breathed a sigh of relief. Stepping forward, the humans found themselves back in their lab. They were home.

Epilogue

"It seems unreal, doesn't it?" Aaron asked.

He, Harlan, Keisha Thomas, Arthur and Dr. Wilkinson were in the office of Carter. They had

contacted their superiors in Washington, telling them everything. About the othermen. About their infiltration ability. And about the fact that they undoubtedly had the secrets of teleportation between worlds.

While it would probably take the Queen and Pilot to learn everything about the flash drive, once they first developed a way to read it, none of the humans doubted that in time, Somnus would master the abilities required to make their own gateways.

Which raised many questions. Would they seek revenge? Would they simply watch, as the humans would continue to watch? Would they go elsewhere? Or would they realize that they needed to first solve their own problems?

“If I hadn’t seen the skies of Somnus myself, I don’t think I would appreciate it either,” Harlan said.

“We will keep watching in secret,” Arthur said. “That at least, Washington made clear. And we need to put together more thorough reports of everything we’ve learned as well.”

He looked at his old mentor. “How are you, Dr. Harlan? I mean, really.”

“You know, in spite of everything, I think I’m better than I’ve been in a long time,” Harlan answered. He looked around at the others. “I’ve seen and experienced incredible things, as have we all, but I don’t doubt my own mind. I don’t fear another breakdown like…before.”

He shuddered, and Aaron put a hand on the older man’s arm. “And I can’t thank you enough for coming back for me. I’ve… well, I’ve struggled my whole life to find a place to belong. A purpose. I don’t now.”

“We will stand together,” Keisha agreed. “None of our own will be left behind or find themselves without help or hope. Never doubt that.”

“I don’t,” he assured her. “Not anymore.”

He looked back to the door. Beyond were the gateways, which they would reassemble and reanalyze to get back the information that Ranyos tried to erase. “Stand together. Humanity better do that. Whatever happens, we need to stand together.”

Biology of the othermen

The othermen are a species of sentient insect. Their bodies are exoskeletal with the outer layer of skin being gray in color, and thick enough to repel the shots of small to medium firearms. Their growth consists of several moltings, followed by the final one in which a brief pupal stage is followed by a full adult. Only adults have wings.

Like the insects of Earth, their bodies are divided into head, abdomen and thorax. However, the thorax is vestigial and only appears as the gluteal area. The fact

that they only have two sets of limbs corresponds to their roughly human appearance.

In the time Before, there were equal members of male and female. The growth of either is related to the final molting, which serves as both puberty and the development of flight. The regulation was previously done by three hormones. A juvenile hormone promoted regular growth, a molting hormone promoted metamorphosis, and a final hormone signaled adult development. Said hormones would fluctuate through life and the areas of the brain producing molting and final hormones would degrade, as the final stage of growth had been accomplished.

After the Thought War, the genetics of the othermen were altered in order to create a new society. In order to remake the race as a hive, the final hormone was engineered into three. The first variant, on the Y

chromosome, resulted in a mature male. The second, on the X chromosome, resulted in a female mature in every way other than reproductive potential.

To produce a queen, one of the worker females is selected and given injections of the third hormone, which completes the process of maturity and enables the laying of eggs. It also stimulates further growth of the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for aggression and initiative. This function is suppressed in most othermen due to the genetic engineering.

The ability to reverse cocoon is due to the fact that the molting hormones' storage and secretion areas do not degrade with the age of the individual. After the final molting, they instead go dormant. Apparently, they are reactivated by conscious thought, as the brain and nervous system is far more developed than even that of humans. Of course, if a queen were to reverse cocoon,

she would reemerge as a worker and need to undergo a new series of treatments, as the queen hormone is completely synthetic.

The nervous, digestive, circulating and reproductive systems are all arranged roughly parallel to one another. Othermen have no teeth, but a sharp plate at the top and bottom of their mouths that take the place of mandibles in Earth insects. Othermen are omnivores, and have powerful salivary and digestive enzymes. If an otherman were to bite another living thing, the bite would do extreme mechanical as well as corrosive damage.

The reverse metamorphosis also proved useful to the infiltration of human ranks. The othermen's exoskeletons have multiple nerves which can direct growth during molting. While they don't 'shapeshift' in the popular sense of the word, they can bring their appearance to resemble a human's quite well. Even to

the extent of mimicking a specific human with a fair degree of success.

Disease is rare among the othermen. Injuries requiring surgery are also rare in their modern era, as there has been no war since they became a hive. While workers and drones are required to work in some specific task, they may choose which occupation they wish, so long as it is available. They are ‘paid’ in food and shelter and no commodities are produced save what are necessary.

Nevertheless, there is the occasional deviant or mentally ill, as the othermen are still more individual than the social insects of Earth. These are rarely executed, and more often exiled. The underdeveloped amygdala blunts aggression, so a dangerous criminal is a rare occurrence indeed.

Over time, more othermen were reverting to wild types, that is, normal sterile females along with males. These were also exiled and became the tribe of ‘Outliers’ that lived in the vicinity of the Scavengers. The Scavengers were simply descendants of othermen who had been injected with extra growth hormone and steroids that blunted their intelligence, but increased their strength.

Surgery is performed by the Pilot in his chambers, which have both a medical unit and manufacturing center. Genetic abnormalities and susceptibility to infections were largely weeded out due to their genetic engineering.

The culture of the othermen

Only a little of their history is known. Before the Thought War, or simply ‘Before,’ the othermen almost certainly had varying beliefs, but they were either

forgotten or not told to the humans. While the Pilot and Queen probably know more than they said, they had only limited time with the humans and explained things more in terms of how the hive began.

The Society had existed for millennia. How long is difficult to say, as the years of Somnus differ from those of Earth's. Moreover, while the othermen view time as linear, not circular, they don't have any mythical, cultural or historical heroes. Even the names of previous Queens aren't given great emphasis. Othermen society is concerned with maintaining status quo, but they have no rituals or customs to mark rights of passage or the changing of the seasons.

Nevertheless, they do know how to read and write. They have some prose and poetic literature. Apart from history, they do praise nature without worshipping it. Scientifically, they recognize the elements, matter and

energy. Poetically and spiritually, they described reality as the solid, liquid, vapor and heat. Each of these in turn, and each individual thing, is a mixture of masculine and feminine.

Masculine is protective and providing. Feminine is nurturing. Masculine is active. Feminine is passive. Masculine acts. Feminine reacts. Heat and vapor are seen as predominately masculine due to their speed of movement, high energy, and diffusion through solid and liquid, which are seen as predominately feminine. Males are predominately masculine with some feminine, while females are the reverse.

It must be emphasized that one is not seen as more important than the other. Both are needed in all things for proper balance and suitability to function. Excess masculine, to the othermen, produces arrogance, inability to work with others, and violence. Excess

feminine produces cowardice and feebleness. Again, balance needs to be maintained, nor is balance necessarily 50 / 50. Proper proportion depends on the specific thing being described.

This may bear some resemblance to the Chinese notions of yin and yang. The othermen deny pantheistic religious beliefs. They do not see creation as distilling out of and going back into a Creator God or an energy field or universal spirit. Masculine and feminine are part of everything, but all things aren't seen as ultimately being 'one.' Masculine and feminine is more than an abstract concept, but less than a brahmanistic one.

The othermen, again, see time as linear. They believe in a creation, and thus, a Creator above and beyond the universe. While they have no holidays, Sabbaths, corporate worship or churches, they do have scriptures, which consist of revelations brought to them

by those who have had visions. Queens, drones, and workers have all had visions throughout their history, albeit rarely.

The visions involve the lights which gave the Pilot sentience. Whether three lights or one showing different spectrums, (opinions differ), the lights seem to be the source of all. From them come revelation, occasional instruction, and guidance.

It would seem that there will be more to come, and soon.

Aaron Adams spoke with Ranyos, while he was disguised as Ellis Harlan about history. Mr. Adams had hoped at one point to write his own book on general history for lay readers. While that never came to be, he

did prepare the following in his report to the project's superiors:

Government, like economics, technology and medicine, are necessities for human life from the Fall of Man till the present day. Government began in prehistory, and seems to have been a combination of the outgrowth of families, in which the patriarch was the understood head, and the appearance of leaders attempting to bring order and organization to their fellow men. In Sumer, that oldest of all known civilizations, the king or Lugal (literal meaning 'big man'), was elected to head the community in times of need, such as in war. Eventually the practice became hereditary.

In Greece, kings or tyrants founded cities, and eventually gave way to democracy, particularly in

Athens. In Rome, seven kings are said to have ruled initially, before a democratic republic supplanted them. Romulus and his initial successors are generally regarded as legendary, while the final one or two are believed to be historical.

In any event, three basic forms were known by the time of Classical Greece, and no real additional forms have been developed since. Essentially, they are rule of the one, the few or the many. In his Politics, Aristotle describes them as monarchies, aristocracies and constitutional states. He then goes on to say that each one can become corrupt and degenerate to a tyranny, an oligarchy, or a democracy. A democracy, per Aristotle, is the many poor oppressing the few rich, an oligarchy the few rich oppressing the many poor, and a tyranny one oppressing everyone else.

They are each overthrown in turn by a single rebel leader or a mob, chaos reigns for a time, and a new system arises. Even before Aristotle, the historian Herodotus in his History has the Persian king Darius discuss different forms of government when he and a few noblemen plot to overthrow the current Persian monarch. Whether such a speech actually took place or not is a matter of conjecture, but it does provide evidence that even before Aristotle, all possible systems had already been tried with varying successes.

In the Bible, we see essentially the same thing with Israel. Judges are raised up by God in times of trouble. Eventually judges give way to kings; indeed before David and Saul, one of judge Gideon's sons attempts to become a hereditary monarch, albeit briefly. No doubt, courtiers formed an aristocratic body in those kings' houses just

as they did in secular palaces. As King Solomon observed, there is nothing new under the sun.

Which form is the best, that is, which government will do the most to preserve order, protect from enemies and limit abuse is an old debate with as many answers as there are thinkers. The ancient and medieval thinkers saw democracies as little better than mob rule. The Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle, felt aristocracies were the best because a body of nobles would, they thought, keep one another in check, unlike one man, who could be swept up in impulsive passion.

In his book on kingship for the king of Cyprus, St. Thomas Aquinas advocated for a monarch who would be dedicated to the Christian faith. For monarchs who seek honor and fame often degenerate into cruelty. Moreover, without the morality that comes with religion, the monarch would seek only his own wealth and pleasure,

and thus oppress his subjects. Notwithstanding, a monarch would still be better than an aristocracy, because that set up would only breed rivalry for ultimate power. Perhaps St. Thomas remembered the words of Darius to his co-conspirators in Herodotus when he made that particular point.

Machiavelli believed in a similar manner to St. Thomas, except that he felt it better to be feared than loved, while St. Thomas felt the other way around. The monk felt that fear on the subjects' part would lead to anger and uprising, while the Renaissance man felt that being loved would erode the respect due a ruler. He did feel that a prince should draw the line at being hated, however, to ensure stability in his reign.

Then came the Age of Enlightenment and the Founding Fathers of the United States, who sought to create democracy with a system of checks and balances.

This was to preserve order and curtail abuse. As author Robert Heinlein noted, it was the divine right of man replacing the divine right of kings.

At this juncture, perhaps it would be well to mention that in addition to three basic forms of government, there are two forms of economic systems, namely capitalism and socialism. Of course, the latter became popular when some members of the poor became enamored of the works of Karl Marx. I will not call him a philosopher, for he is hardly worthy of the name. He was merely an angry man who took out his anger on the entire world, as the wars of the twentieth century testify.

In any event, the East and West in those days had differing ideologies, different governments and different means of acquiring wealth. The West valued the individual, while the East the group. The difference can be described as right and left.

Right and left wing are terms that originated in the days of the French revolution, in which the wealthy nobles sat on the right and the poor on the left. While right has been conflated with conservative and left with liberal, this is not necessarily the case. Conservative and liberal simply mean wanting to keep things as they are versus change them. While it is true that liberal can be equated with left now, it must be remembered that, looking at the history of Russia, both Lenin and Gorbachev were liberal in their own times. Lenin wanted a left change, while Gorbachev wanted a shift in his party more to the right, owing to his friendship with President Reagan.

The right wishes anyone who could to become wealthy. The left wishes to use law and law enforcement to prevent the acquisition of wealth. Ironically the left can be, in the end, as tyrannical as the right.

A right leaning tyranny will have career politicians and wealthy businessmen. A left leaning tyranny will have bureaucrats and revolutionary soldiers. The left produced its dictators just as the right did. In trying to care for the whole group, the left ended up being controlled by one ambitious ruler or group of the same. For socialism and communism can only work in small communities where every individual indeed can take part in every decision. Otherwise, government officials are elected or appointed, and the old classes reappear.

In our own country, our current parties lean either far right or far left. Each one believes that to improve society, it is a simple matter of making government more left or more right. Or to have one specific person or another in power. Both naively ignore the fact that a society is ultimately only as good as its people.

It is my firm belief that any of the three government or the two economic systems can ‘work’ if the vast majority of its citizens adhere to the common good. Or, to put it in religious terms, if they ‘love the Lord their God with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind and all their strength, and love their neighbor as themselves.’ Needless to say, that is a great caveat.

At present, I believe government has gone as far as it can go in terms of structure. To seek further bureaucratic change will likely cause more harm than good, as such things would erode at the concept of checks and balances. Furthermore, debating with one’s neighbors on this or that candidate has always seemed to me a colossal waste of time.

If society is to be improved, then we need to work on making ourselves and those around us better people. Since people are a combination of nature, nurture and

choice, we can nurture virtue and virtuous people through such institutions as charities, civic organizations, and churches. It is my belief that if all contributed to such as these; they would improve their communities, and in the long run, their civilizations. In any event, it would do far more positive good than 'arguing politics.'

The othermen had a different method. They sought to change their nature through genetic engineering. On Earth, similar thinking among nineteenth and twentieth century intellectuals gave rise to the eugenics movement. While the eugenicists lacked knowledge of DNA or the ability to genetically engineer, they did try to improve humanity by incarcerating and sterilizing people deemed unworthy, either due to disease, lower intelligence, or, more often, who didn't fit the racial profile of the eugenicists themselves. In practice, this

was one of the tools used by the Third Reich to justify their wholesale slaughter.

While such practices would be (rightly) unethical on Earth, the othermen were in a different position. There seemed to be no different ethnic groups in the time Before, and thus no racism. Moreover, they were driven by desperation and facing extinction after their Thought War.

As it is, the experiment seems to be failing in the long term. Wild type othermen are returning, and some of the Deceiver caste in the Society, Ranyos in particular, long for change and new challenges. Arachne wants to maintain things as they are, but I feel that will no longer be possible. We left a few communicators and weapons with the Outliers to defend themselves better from Society and Scavenger alike.

What will the future bring to Somnus? I'm not sure how or why we even found ourselves there. The fact that the Pilot alluded to 'lights' and that we first saw the same light makes me wonder if something or Someone greater than all of us wanted us to come together. But whether this was for our sake or the othermen's, or both, who can say?

Whether the queen proves to be the proverbial 'great ruler' or just another name in the long list of tyrants, is a story still being written.

-Aaron Adams

Also by Matthew Striegel:

1) Kayraan (2005)
2) Necromancer (2008)
3) Through the valley of shadow (2009)
4) The othermen (short story collection) (2010)

5) Necromancer 2: the awakening (2010)
6) Necromancer, Rosedog edition (contains the content of Necromancer and Necromancer 2) (2011)
7) Season of Winter (2012)
8) The distant moon (remake of Kayraan) (2020)
9) Tales of the Necromancer (2020)
10) The ruins of Koya (2020)
11) Through time eternal (2021)
12) Inana, Queen of Apsu (2022)
13) Xanthia (2022)
14) Necromancer, the ancient evil (2022)
15) The last king of Israel (2023)
16) Mooresville (2023)
17) Bronwyn and Lir (2024)
18) Necromancer, shattered soul (2024)
19) The othermen (novel) (2025)

My novels and stories all take place within a connected multiverse. For the origin and mechanics of said multiverse, see Necromancer, the ancient evil and

Necromancer, shattered soul. Most of them take place in the same universe; the exceptions are as follows:

1)Kayraan, Through the Valley of Shadow, The distant moon and Xanthia each take place in their own self contained universe.

2)Inana, queen of Apsu, Necromancer, the ancient evil and Necromancer, shattered soul all take place in their own universe. This could be thought of as the ‘prime universe’ for reasons covered in those works.

3) All others, including this current one, take place in one universe, an alternate one to the prime universe, where more supernatural and science fiction events occur.

The way in which this arrangement came about was that I began writing Inana, queen of Apsu, as a poetic

version of the first story taking place in Tales of the Necromancer, that is, the origin story of Inana, the necromancer of the title. As I wrote, however, I began making slight changes in the poetic version. In particular, I pitted her against Calculon, my angel of death. Calculon was created several years after Inana, and first appeared in Through time eternal. Because I wished to have both my favorite good and favorite evil character meet, he plays a prominent role in the poetic version of Inana's story. That deviation I followed up with its two prose sequels. At this time, however, I have no plans for different universes within my fictional outline to meet.

-Matthew Striegel: 2/21/25